

No. 48

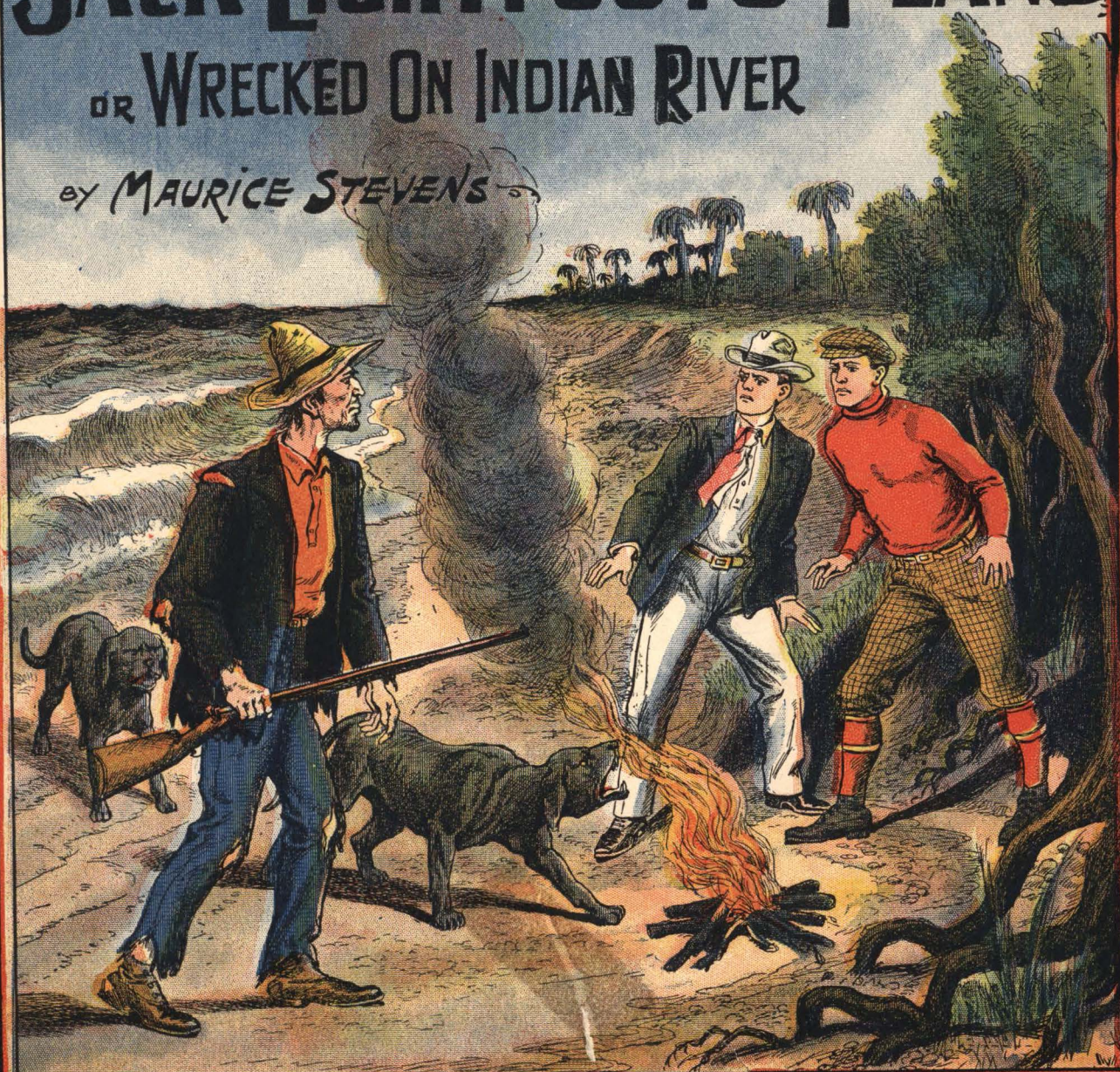
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ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY

JACK LIGHTFOOT'S PLANS

OR WRECKED ON INDIAN RIVER

by MAURICE STEVENS



When they caught sight of the raw-bone Florida "cracker" and his bar dogs the two storm-bound cruisers knew there was fresh trouble brewing.

Publishers' Note. "Teach the American boy how to become an athlete, and lay the foundation for a Constitution greater than that of the United States."—Wise sayings from "Tip Top." There has never been a time when the boys of this great country took so keen an interest in all manly and health-giving sports as they do to-day. As proof of this witness the record-breaking throngs that attend college struggles on the gridiron, as well as athletic and baseball games, and other tests of endurance and skill. In a multitude of other channels this love for the "life strenuous" is making itself manifest, so that, as a nation, we are rapidly forging to the front as seekers of honest sport. Recognizing this "handwriting on the wall," we have concluded that the time has arrived to give this vast army of young enthusiasts a publication devoted exclusively to invigorating out-door life. We feel we are justified in anticipating a warm response from our sturdy American boys, who are sure to revel in the stirring phases of sport and adventure, through which our characters pass from week to week.

ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY

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No. 48.

NEW YORK, January 6, 1906.

Price Five Cents.

JACK LIGHTFOOT'S PLANS;

OR,

WRECKED ON INDIAN RIVER.

By MAURICE STEVENS.

CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

Jack Lightfoot, the best all-round athlete in Cranford or vicinity, a lad clear of eye, clean of speech, and, after he had conquered a few of his faults, possessed of a faculty for *doing things* while others were talking, that by degrees caused him to be looked upon as the natural leader in all the sports Young America delights in—a boy who in learning to conquer himself put the power into his hands to wrest victory from others.

Tom Lightfoot, Jack's cousin, and sometimes his rival; though their striving for the mastery was always of the friendly, generous kind. Tom was called the "Book-Worm" by his fellows, on account of his love for studying such secrets of nature as practical observers have discovered and published; so that he possessed a fund of general knowledge calculated to prove useful upon many occasions.

Lafe Lampton, a big, hulking chap, with an ever present craving for something to eat. Lafe always had his appetite along, and proved a stanch friend of our hero through thick and thin.

John Macklin, an Indian River lad who made the acquaintance of our friends, and in whom they took a deep interest.

Mrs. Macklin, John's mother, and a very good sort of a mother too.

Mr. Linscott, a planter of pineapples and early vegetables, who did his utmost to give the boys a roaring good time.

The Pigsons, a family of "crackers" who made it a point to get the living the world owed them, much to the disgust of their neighbors.

CHAPTER I.

A CURIOUS ADVENTURE.

"Look out for that log, Jack!"

This warning came from Lafe Lampton.

It was the precursor of one of the most curious adventures that had yet befallen the Cranford boys, Jack Lightfoot, Tom, and Lafe, during their cruise down the famous Indian River, in Florida.

They now had been four days absent from Mr. Linscott's place, their main headquarters, from which they had covered many miles, with no end of sport and adventures, of which many already have been narrated.

It was quite early in the morning, and the three boys then occupied a small skiff boat, with which they had been provided by a fourth boy with whom they had become slightly acquainted, having met him while fishing on the river the previous afternoon.

This boy's name was John Macklin. He was about the same age as the Cranford boys, and his home was on the west side of the river, nearly opposite the place

where the cruisers had met him, he also having been fishing near by at the same time.

Quite naturally they had struck up an acquaintance, the Southern boy being a very prepossessing young chap; and he proved to be quite as kind and accommodating as his looks indicated.

Upon learning that Jack and his companions had only their sailboats with them, and that they wanted to visit one of the winding creeks the next morning to reconnoiter and also search for mullet bait for further fishing, in doing which a rowboat was much more convenient and less laboriously handled, Macklin very kindly had offered to loan them his, an offer which was gratefully accepted.

Jack Lightfoot had thanked him heartily, promising to take good care of the skiff and leave it where it belonged, hauled up on a point of land which Macklin had showed them.

The latter had agreed to leave the oars for them in the boat, that they might come across from their camp on the opposite sand-ridge the next morning and get her.

This they had done quite early, and, with net and bait-boxes aboard, they had rowed well up into a shallow inlet in search of the desired bait.

This inlet was somewhat enclosed from the rays of sunlight by many mangroves and other trees which grew along either side of it, and it was upon arriving here that Lafe had uttered his words of warning to his fellow cruiser.

He then was seated in the stern of the boat, with a Spanish cast-net in his hand, which Macklin had showed him how to use, while Tom Lightfoot, who had been rowing, occupied the middle thwart, and had just taken in his oars.

Jack Lightfoot had risen to his feet in the bow, however, and stood ready to toss out the boat's anchor, to hold her while they were getting the bait.

This anchor was the kind commonly called a kedge when used in small boats. It has six curved and slightly barbed prongs radiating from a common center where they join the main iron shaft of the anchor.

It was owing to this type of anchor that the curious incident occurred.

Jack turned slightly and glanced aft when Lafe uttered his cry of warning:

"Look out for that log!"

"What log, Lafe?" he rejoined. "I don't see any log."

"Nearly dead ahead," cried Lafe pointing. "Can't

you see the black bark on one end of it lying there on the water?"

"Oh, yes, I do now."

"You'll be throwing the kedge over it, unless you are careful," added Lafe; "and then the warp may get snarled all around it."

"The warp will not snarl," replied Jack, with the kedge poised in his hand. "The log will serve to hold us all the better. The bottom here is somewhat muddy, and we may drag unless we hook on to something solid."

He hooked on to something all right, for, while he spoke the last word, Jack let the kedge fly through the air, straight over the end of the supposed log.

It looked enough like a log, or a strip of dark bark lying on the water, to have deceived almost anybody.

It was, however, the nose of a half-sleeping alligator.

The boys, moreover, were not long in discovering the fact.

The instant the kedge struck him, falling directly across and under the reptile's neck and shoulder, he sank to the bottom like a flash, with a startled swish and splash of his tremendous tail.

"Howling mackerels!" yelled Lafe, half starting to his feet. "It's an alligator!"

None of the boys had been on the lookout for anything of this sort, for, while alligators may still be occasionally seen along the Indian River, they do not abound there as in some localities, and generally are found in the narrow creeks or shallow bends of the streams that flow into the great lagoon.

This fellow proved to be quite a large one, however, fully ten feet in length, and, while slow and cumbrous enough to land, it could move with amazing rapidity through the water when seriously alarmed.

In this case, moreover, the alligator not only was alarmed, but quite severely wounded. For when the reptile sank, bent upon hurriedly escaping, one of the curved prongs of the iron kedge, which he had dragged with him to the bottom, caught under the skin next to one of his front flippers, and was buried deeply in the fleshy, unprotected shoulder when he started quickly away.

In a nutshell, the alligator was securely hooked by the iron kedge.

This in turn was secured to the bow of the skiff by means of a strong line fully twenty feet in length.

It was lucky for the boys that the rope was a long one, moreover, or the alligator's tail would have played havoc with the Cranford crack athletes during the next fifteen minutes.

The moment the reptile felt the jab of the kedge into his shoulder, he started away through the water and over the bottom as if out to break a record.

Jack Lightfoot saw the slack rope at his feet begin to pay out as rapidly as if attached to the missile of a life-saver's gun.

"Look out, boys!" he yelled, with startling accents. "Hang on!"

He saw what was coming.

As quick as a flash he stooped and tried to grab the rail of the skiff on either side to steady himself.

The alligator won out, however, though the time required was only a second.

The whisking rope suddenly became as taut as a bow-string, and the skiff leaped a good six feet under the tremendous impulse.

Instead of catching the rails at which he had reached, Jack Lightfoot lost his footing, and went backward plumb over Tom's head, and into Lafe Lampton's lap.

"Hang on! We're in for it!" he gasped, as Lafe braced himself suddenly and caught him.

Naturally, when the rope came taut, the kedge was buried still deeper into the alligator's shoulder.

The pain served only to increase his fright and speed, and he now let out at his limit, with the boat and boys in tow.

Whish!

The bow of the skiff swung round as if hit by an ocean liner.

Swash!

One huge wave rose from her nose when she started, speeding to either side of her, yet drenching the startled boys with its splash and foam.

Then she was off like a race-horse, or a shooting-star, and darting through the water as never before.

Luckily most of the weight was aft and the boat fairly trimmed, Jack having fallen squarely between Lafe's feet. If the contrary had been the case, and the boat badly balanced, an upset would have been inevitable.

As it was, several seconds passed before the boys could pull themselves together and realize what had happened.

Jack was the first to steady himself, and he quickly shouted:

"Hang on! Keep the boat on an even bottom! Face forward, Tom, and help keep her steady."

"What in thunder's happened?" gasped Lafe, with eyes bulging from his head.

"We are hitched fast to the alligator."

"Howling mackerels!"

"That's what we are," yelled Tom, scrambling round on the thwart amidships, and staring wildly at the taut, half-submerged rope.

It was cutting through the water with a swish and whirr, and the boat was fairly leaping over the surface, with a gurgle like that of a mill-race under her stern-post.

"Cut that line, Tom!" yelled Lafe, who by no means was looking for trouble with an alligator. "Reach forward and cut that line."

"Don't do it—stop!" shouted Jack Lightfoot.

"But the infernal cuss will upset us, or drag us plumb out into the Atlantic."

"I can't help that," cried Jack, straining every muscle to steady the wildly surging skiff. "I'm blessed if I'll cut that line and let the alligator get away with John Macklin's kedge and warp."

"Better do that than all of us go to the bottom and——"

"Look out!" roared Tom, who was wildly watching forward.

Swish!

Zipp!

Swash!

The alligator suddenly had swerved.

He already had done three hundred yards straight away toward the middle of the Indian River, at a rate of speed sufficient to have turned a locomotive green with envy.

He was, of course, out of sight below the surface, but the boys knew he was there all right.

Tom Lightfoot had seen the taut rope suddenly deviate, and instantly uttered his timely cry of warning.

The skiff swung round as if it had been on a pivot.

Then off it started at a right angle to its previous direction.

"Now he's bound up the river, the cuss!" cried Lafe, which brought a nervous laugh from both Jack and Tom.

Finding that they might yet avoid tipping over, as well as being bitten in twain by the monster steed to which they found themselves attached, they began to appreciate the extraordinary situation, and to feel the stress of excitement which such an experience would naturally arouse.

"He'll yank us clear to the Indian River inlet!" roared Lafe, dodging a swash of water over one rail.

"Sit quiet! Keep her steady!" cautioned Jack, crouching in the middle of the boat somewhat aft. "He will play himself out before long."

"Play out be blowed!" gasped Lafe. "He's going faster than ever."

"He can't keep it up much longer," replied Jack confidently.

"I reckon you don't know him."

"He'll have to let up soon, Lafe."

"Mebbe we'll all be on bottom before that comes off."

"No, no, he's easing up," Tom Lightfoot now cried over his shoulder, with his voice lowered a little, much as if he feared the reptile might hear him.

"Are you sure?" demanded Jack.

"The rope seems to be slackening a little."

"Don't move, Lafe! Don't come forward," cried Jack, for Lafe was anxious to see for himself.

"Why not?"

"Because, if he starts off again, we must have most of the weight aft," Jack readily explained. "If our bow ever buries itself in the water, we shall fill and upset in a jiffy. Keep most of the weight aft, so the boat will tow without tipping."

"That's right, Lafe," cried Tom, from the forward thwart.

"Is he slowing down?" gurgled Lafe, half choked with excitement.

"I think he is—yes, I now am sure of it."

Up to this time, not for a moment during this succession of remarks had the speed of the skiff decreased in the slightest degree.

Twenty feet ahead of the invisible alligator it had sped in nearly a direct line up the river until fully half-a-mile had been covered.

Now, however, as Tom had noticed, the kedge rope began to waver and slacken.

Plainly enough the violent exertions and tremendous speed had begun to tell upon the reptile, and he was evidently inclined to pause and regain wind—or whatever restoration would become an alligator under such conditions.

Half-a-minute later the rope went slack, and the boat lay motionless on the river's surface, nearly amid-stream and over half-a-mile from her starting point.

This gave the boys a chance to catch their breath and steady their heads.

CHAPTER II.

BIG GAME.

"Well, here's a quandary," declared Jack, as the three boys gazed doubtfully at one another in the motionless boat.

"I should say so," cried Lafe.

"What's to be done?" asked Tom.

"That's the question," replied Jack. "We easily can cut the rope and row away, but by taking that course we shall lose young Macklin's kedge and rope, and I wish to avoid that."

"Humph!" grunted Lafe. "We can buy him another."

"True, we can pay him the price, yet this kind may not be easily or conveniently obtained by him," argued Jack.

"That's right, too," said Tom.

"Then there's another side of the question," added Jack. "I don't fancy letting this alligator get the best of us in this fashion."

"That's more like business," said Lafe, brightening up. "If you'd started in by saying that, I'd have been with you."

"Look over the bow, Tom, and see if you can sight him. Easy, old man, lest he makes another break and starts off with a rush."

Thus cautioned, Tom Lightfoot gingerly bent forward and peered over the bow.

Only the dull, dark depths of the water met his searching gaze.

Presently he turned aft and said:

"Nothing doing, Jack. I can't see him."

"Which way does the warp run?" asked Jack.

"It seems to run diagonally under the boat."

"Jiminy crickets!" muttered Lafe, with eyes bulging again. "He may be right below us. It will be all day with us if we ever get a crack from his tail."

Jack knew that this was no joke, and he grew more grave.

Taking up an oar, he said, quietly:

"Shift places with me, Lafe."

"What's that for?"

"I wish to steer the boat with this oar, and keep her steady in case he starts off again," explained Jack, as they changed places.

Then with the blade of the oar he gently backed the boat, until he could see that the warp made away from her, instead of under her.

"That's better," nodded Tom, from the bow. "I guess we are pretty near the length of the warp away from him."

"The cuss can't have swallowed that kedge, can he?" demanded Lafe, with grim uncertainty.

"No, not at all," replied Jack. "I must have thrown it over his neck, and when he made his break to escape the prongs must have become imbedded in his throat,

or some fleshy place not protected by his scaly hide. At all events, it is caught securely in him."

"Mebbe he's visiting a surgeon down there, and undergoing an operation to have it removed," grinned Lafe, more and more at ease when the skiff continued motionless.

Jack realized, however, that they were by no means out of the scrape, unless they decided to cut the rope and lose the kedge, and this he was bound not to do if it could be avoided.

"There's only one way of getting the best of him, boys," he declared.

"How's that?"

"By drowning him."

"Drowning him?"

"The same as we play a fish," explained Jack. "If we can keep him on the go and utterly exhaust him, and at the same time avoid his tail and jaws, we yet may get the best of him."

"That's kind of a risky undertaking, isn't it?" demanded Lafe.

"Possibly," admitted Jack. "But Tom can have his knife ready, and cut the rope, if it becomes necessary."

"I've had it ready for some time," said Tom, glancing back. "I'm not inclined to take too long chances with this kind of game."

"Mebbe the cuss has got the kedge out of him, and gone about his business," suggested Lafe, glancing over the side. "If he hasn't, it strikes me that he wouldn't lie quiet so long."

"Haul in a little of the warp, Tom, and see if you can feel him move," advised Jack. "Be ready, however, all hands, in case he cuts loose again and has another tantrum."

"All ready?" inquired Tom, with a glance over his shoulder.

"Steady, every one of us," said Jack, running the oar blade over the stern to serve as a rudder. "Now, Tom, haul in slightly."

Tom reached over the bow, and drew in a couple of feet of the warp, then a foot or two more.

"Nothing doing," he cried softly.

"Try again," said Jack. "Steady!"

The second attempt did the business.

The kedge was still fast, and, the instant the rested reptile felt the strain on the warp, and the pain that ensued, the same old business was resumed with augmented violence.

Tom caught sight of the long, black creature start-

ing up toward the surface, and he uttered a yell of warning.

"Look out! He's coming up!"

He was up and broke water before the last word was out.

Ten feet to one side of the boat a huge head shot into view, then several feet of body, with the kedge rope drawn taut over the neck and shoulder.

Then came the swish of a tremendous tail, sweeping scarce five feet from the boat, and showering her occupants with half-a-tub of flying water.

Jack bore hard down on the oar, and swung the boat away.

"Steady!" he roared. "We're off again!"

The alligator had vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

Then the rope became a bowstring again, and once more the skiff went tearing through the water, and straight down the stream, as swiftly as if attached to the stern of a turbine launch.

Three hundred yards were covered before this living tugboat let up again.

Then Jack, who had decided what to do, feeling that he quite easily could guide the boat, shouted lustily:

"Don't let him stop, Tom. Keep him a-going and tucker him out. Yank on the rope, and keep him on the move."

"That's the stuff," cried Lafe. "No between rounds! Make it a steady mill, Tom, a continuous performance."

Tom reached over and gave the warp a violent yank.

It acted like a spur plunged into the flank of a jaded steed.

Off went the boat again, this time across the river, deviating like a flash from her former course, and leaving a swish and swirl astern like that of a Sound steamer.

Another hundred yards were covered, and then came another let up, and another yank on the warp.

Now fifty yards down-stream and nearer the west bank, and then the same was repeated.

"He's getting tired," shouted Jack. "We shall tucker him out, boys. Keep him on the move, Tom, and be sure to give him all of the rope. Don't let us run over him."

Tom yanked again, and off they sped anew.

Every spurt was with waning speed, however, and of shorter duration.

With half-an-eye, despite the fact that the alligator was invisible under the water, one could see that he was becoming thoroughly exhausted.

The earlier apprehensions of the boys had begun to

wane, and now there came instead a wild exhilaration and excitement, with a desire to slay the monster reptile which in so startling a manner had interrupted their fishing expedition.

"We can do him up," declared Lafe. "I see his finish."

"Don't be too sure of it," cautioned Jack. "One whack from his tail would demolish the boat and possibly kill one of us."

"Then we must keep away from the tail," cried Lafe. "Don't let him slow up, Tom."

Tom Lightfoot kept yanking on the warp, and with every yank the kedge tore deeper into the alligator's shoulder.

This kept the injured, yet enraged, reptile constantly on the move; now up the stream, now down; now this way, now that; till fully another quarter hour had passed, and his slower movements indicated that he was nearly played out.

"He's most all in," cried Jack. "He can't stand it much longer."

"Sure he can't," declared Lafe.

"Look out, boys!" yelled Tom suddenly.

As he spoke, the skiff again switched off at a right angle, and once more went tearing through the water.

The alligator, as if inspired with a new and desperate resolution of his own, suddenly had taken a new course, and started for the shallow water along the river bank, making a bee-line into the mouth of the very creek out of which he had started.

"Steady, boys!" said Jack, never for a moment losing his head.

"There'll be trouble for us if he gets back into the shallow water," cried Lafe excitedly.

"Give him all of the rope, Tom."

"He has it, Jack."

"Steady, boys! Steady!"

The boat, still dragged furiously along, now was speeding within ten feet of a line of mangroves growing nearly down to the water's edge.

Here the water was less than two feet deep, and Tom Lightfoot suddenly yelled:

"There he is! I can see him!"

"Look out!" shrieked Lafe. "He's stopping!"

Jack saw the immediate danger that the moving boat might run right on over the monster, the huge tail of which now appeared above the surface with a furious swish and swirl.

In an instant Jack was upon his feet.

Reaching well forward, he jabbed the long oar

fiercely down upon bottom, and at once checked the momentum of the boat.

"Good enough!" gurgled Lafe, catching his breath. "Bully for you, Jack."

The boat now was hanging nearly motionless, yet scarce a dozen feet from the floundering reptile.

Some ten feet to the right was the line of shore, with the mangroves growing nearly to the water's edge.

Jack Lightfoot quickly saw the opportunity the situation presented, and he readily took advantage of it.

"Quietly, boys!" he softly exclaimed. "We must finish the fellow before he can regain his strength. Can you unhitch that rope from the ring in the bow, Tom?"

"Yes, sure," Tom quickly rejoined. "It's tied with a bowline."

"Do so, then, and look sharp," said Jack. "Lose not a moment."

He still was keeping his gaze on the alligator, which now was briefly motionless, and at the same time working the skiff nearer the shore.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Lafe excitedly.

"I'm going to quietly work the boat to the bank, then get a turn of the rope around one of those trees," explained Jack.

"Gee whiz! that's the stuff," cried Lafe, under his breath. "Then we shall have him dead to rights."

"No noise," cautioned Jack. "If we startle him he may light out again."

"Sure he will!"

"Then we'll lose rope, kedge, and the whole business."

"I've got the rope free, Jack," cried Tom, in a whisper.

"Easy, then, all of us," said Jack. "Be ready to fend her off, Tom, then step ashore with the rope and take a turn around the trunk of that smallest mangrove."

"The one nearest the water?"

"Sure! The rope will reach to that easily enough."

While speaking, Jack had quietly propelled the skiff nearer the bank, till her nose finally grounded.

"Now, Tom," he cried softly.

Tom Lightfoot crept over the bow, rope in hand, then sneaked quietly along the bank toward the mangrove mentioned.

He reached it all right, and, in half-a-second, he had a turn of the rope around the stout trunk.

"Now we've got him, boys," cried Jack triumphantly. "All ashore, Lafe, and lend a hand."

Both sprang quickly to the bank, and drew up the skiff, then darted to Tom's assistance.

"Keep a secure turn, Tom, and draw up the slack that I give you," cried Jack. "Look out, however, if he makes a break up the bank after us."

"I should say so!"

"Wait a bit, Tom," added Jack. "You, Lafe, tie the end of the rope to that other tree. Then he can't get away in case we are obliged to make tracks to evade him."

"That's a good idea."

"Hurry up!"

Lafe Lampton hastened to comply, and Jack then seized the rope that was lying slack between the tree and the tired reptile.

"Take it up, Tom, as fast as I haul in," he cried.

"Let her come," replied Tom.

Jack hauled in until a drag came on the kedge, and this resulted instantly in renewed efforts on the part of the alligator.

He began to hiss and thresh with tremendous violence, slashing the still water into froth and foam, but the kedge and rope held fast.

"Hang on, Tom," shouted Jack, now a bit excited himself. "Hang on to the turn you've got."

"I'm not losing an inch," gasped Tom, tugging with might and main. Then Lafe also caught hold to help him.

Presently the floundering reptile, not letting up for a moment, worked himself nearer the bank.

Then Jack gave another haul, taking in several more feet of the warp, which Tom and Lafe quickly included in the turn about the tree.

Twice this operation was repeated, until the alligator was within six feet of the low bank.

The water all around him now had become red, and on the surface were large flecks of torn flesh, plainly showing that he was severely wounded and bleeding profusely.

"I can see his finish," Lafe kept repeating, in an excitement he scarce could contain. "He's bleeding like a stuck pig."

"Worse than that," gasped Tom.

"I can see his finish. He's half dead already."

"Now come this side of the tree, and lend me a hand," said Jack, who was running the whole business with masterly caution.

"What are you going to do?"

"We'll haul him out still farther, Lafe, and make the line fast. Then we'll get some clubs and put him out for keeps."

"That's the stuff! Lay hold here, Tom."

All three boys now laid hold of the rope, and, with a steady haul, drew the struggling monster forward until his nose and shoulders came up on the edge of the bank, and they now could see where the kedge was buried deeply near one of his flippers, and sunk well into his breast.

That he already was nearly done for was quite obvious, and, after making the rope fast, the boys found several clubs. With these, after considerable cautious labor, they succeeded in killing the huge creature, and in dragging the lifeless body well out of the water.

They scarce had accomplished it, however, when they heard a loud shout from beyond the clump of mangroves, and, upon turning, saw the Macklin boy running down toward them.

CHAPTER III.

THE MACKLIN BOY.

"Hello! I see you have found the skiff."

This was the greeting of the Macklin boy, as he approached through the clump of mangroves, and saw Jack Lightfoot and his companions standing on the river bank.

It still was quite early in the morning, for the unexpected adventure with the alligator, while stirring and exciting enough to have suited the most fastidious, had occupied only about half-an-hour.

The Cranford boys were red in the face, and sweating like troopers, however, after their excitement and exertions in killing the reptile, yet they turned to cordially greet the Southern lad when he approached.

He was a tall, dark-complexioned fellow, with a taking smile, and frank eyes that quickly won one's liking.

"Yes, we found your boat all right," Jack heartily cried, extending his hand. "And that's not all we found."

Macklin now started with surprise, as he drew nearer and saw the dead alligator.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Where did you run foul of him?"

"Here in the creek."

"And we were not looking for him, either," cried Lafe Lampton, laughing, and mopping his brow.

"By no means," added Tom.

"But what happened? how did you kill him? how came my kedge hooked in him?"

Macklin asked all three questions with a single breath.

Plainly enough, he was more than surprised, and was beginning to think that these Northern boys were something out of the ordinary.

Jack Lightfoot quickly relieved him of his perplexity, however, by briefly telling him just how the extraordinary accident had occurred.

"Well, that's amazing, Jack," Macklin declared, smiling at his own familiarity.

"Wasn't it, John?" returned Jack, with a nod of approval.

"It was, indeed. I've heard of cases somewhat similar, but never of one in which the 'gator could not clear himself."

"Well, this one did not accomplish it."

"So I see."

"He gave us a good run for our money, too," laughed Jack significantly.

"I'd wager he did."

"I'll bet we traveled more than forty miles over that river," cried Lafe.

"Hardly that far, Lafe," Tom remonstrated.

"Well, it seemed as far as that to me."

"I don't wonder," smiled Macklin, drawing nearer to examine the dead creature.

"Is he what you call a large one, John?" asked Lightfoot.

"A buster, Jack, for around here," was the reply, with a nod.

"That's what I thought."

"We see plenty of alligators, you know, but we don't often run across one as large as this in the river. He must have strayed here, I think, from some interior swamp."

"A curious accident, wasn't it?"

"Yes, and you were lucky to escape getting drowned or injured," replied Macklin.

"I should say so."

"The kedge is buried deeply. It seems almost impossible that such an accident could have occurred, if one did not see it with his own eyes."

"That's true," nodded Tom.

"You might have cut the rope and let him go."

"We thought of that, but we didn't want to lose your line and kedge," explained Jack smiling.

Macklin's dark brows lifted a trifle, and he studied Jack's frank face quite intently for a moment.

"That was right good of you," said he slowly. "I don't often run across such fellows as you appear to be, and I reckon I'd like to know you better."

"Come up to Cranford, then, and spend a week or two," laughed Jack, again extending his hand, which

was cordially accepted. "You'll find some more like us up there, and a hearty welcome from all."

"That's mighty good of you," said Macklin; "and sometime I may be able to accept the invitation."

"I hope so, I'm sure."

"Have you got the bait for which you were looking?"

"Not yet," said Tom. "We were after it when we ran upon this fellow."

"Let me help you get it, then," cried Macklin. "I probably can save you some time by showing you the best places."

"Gladly," said Jack readily. "Let's have your big knife, Lafe. I'll cut out this kedge, and then we'll make a hustle for the bait."

"Want my toad-sticker?" queried Lafe.

"The larger the better. My hunting-knife is with my kit aboard the boat."

Lafe produced the huge clasp-knife, and, while Jack was busy extricating the kedge from the dead alligator, Macklin took the opportunity to ask:

"What kind of fish are you going for? That makes some difference, Jack, as to the kind of bait."

"Well, we caught quite a lot of small fish yesterday," cried Jack, glancing up. "We would like to hook some larger kind, if we can."

"I saw you had rods and reels. Are your lines up to date?"

"The best we could buy," replied Jack. "I've got six hundred feet of Hall's linen line on a Frankfort reel. Those of my companions are about as good."

"I reckon they ought to be good enough for anybody," laughed Macklin. "They are better than any I've got, yet mine do well enough for most fish. I don't know how 'twould be if I hooked onto a big channel bass, or a stray tarpon."

"Do tarpon run up here?" asked Jack eagerly.

"They have been known to, but it only happens about once in a lifetime," said Macklin, shaking his head. "I never saw but one caught in here, and he was only a small one, not more than fifty pounds."

"Gee, but I'd like to hook one of that size!" exclaimed Lafe, with eyes widening.

"They are caught at the inlet in spring, weighing upward of two hundred."

"With a rod and reel?"

"Often."

"Jiminy beeswax!"

"They prey on schools of mullet, and sometimes pursue them quite a distance up the river, but they seldom are hooked about here."

"What kind of bait is used?"

"Mullet is about as good as any, with the head and tail off. You might catch a big channel bass, or possibly a cavalle."

"What is required for them?"

"Any ordinary equipment," replied Macklin. "For cavalle live bait is good for still fishing. For trolling, any artificial bait is good. The fish is not nice eating, however."

"To catch one is what we wish," laughed Jack, as he freed the kedge and rose to his feet.

Macklin hesitated for a moment, then said modestly:

"If you care to have me I will get my rod and reel, and put in a day with you."

"Care to have you!" exclaimed Jack Lightfoot. "Indeed, friend Macklin, nothing would suit us better."

"That's kind, I'm sure."

"You shall go with me in my boat."

"Then I will hurry home, and get my rod," cried Macklin, at once displaying some enthusiasm; "and when I return we will get what bait we need, then get at the sport without delay."

"That's the stuff!" cried Lafe.

"I'll return in less than ten minutes," cried Macklin, hastening away.

"He appears to be about the right sort, Jack," said Tom Lightfoot, watching their new acquaintance through the mangroves.

"So he does," assented Jack, with a nod. "I like him very much."

"He's all right," declared Lafe, with characteristic bluntness. "There none of the cracker in him, I'll bet on that."

"Not much like Pigson," laughed Jack. "I think we had better clean up his boat, and put her in shape before he returns."

"A good idea," said Tom. "She needs it badly enough after the tussle we had with that creature."

"Fall to, then, and we'll haul her down this way where the water is clear. You get the line off those trees, Lafe, and bring it along."

"That's easy," grinned Lafe, cheerfully complying. "There will be another advantage in having Macklin with us, Jack."

"What's that?"

"He probably can show us the best localities in which to fish."

"Certainly," nodded Jack, who was busy washing the skiff. "I will take him aboard my boat, and we all will follow his advice as to the best grounds. If

we don't do any trolling, we'll anchor in a bunch so as to be together, yet in such a way that our lines will not interfere."

"We will make it all right," nodded Lafe.

"I guess we'll get a good day's sport out of it despite yonder ugly fellow."

True to his promise, Macklin returned in less than ten minutes, bringing his rod and reel, also a basket for the bait.

"We'll get a few mullet," said he laughing; "and I think we then shall be all right. I have in my basket everything else we shall need in that line."

"We all are very glad that you are going with us," said Jack, relieving him of the rod and basket.

"I am right glad, too," said Macklin. "So tumble aboard and we'll get the mullet in no time, and then pull across the river to your boats. The skiff is good to fish out of, but it's too small for four to work conveniently in, so we'll have to use the others. Besides," he added laughing, "you might hook on to something big, even if not as large as an alligator."

"I hope so, Macklin, on my word," said Jack, bending to the oars, and shooting the light skiff farther up the creek.

Lafe turned and took a last look at the bank, and the huge dead creature, lying there, still partly submerged in the water.

Then he turned to Tom Lightfoot and quietly muttered, with a significant wink and a ludicrous grimace: "Gee whiz! No more of them in mine, Tom."

Tom Lightfoot laughed, then glanced up and noticed that Macklin, who had observed the side remark, appeared to feel that something had been said about him.

"Lafe only remarked that he has all he wants of alligators," Tom hastened to explain.

The smile quickly returned to the face of Macklin, who evidently was a sensitive lad, and he cheerfully rejoined:

"I don't wonder at it. They are not very agreeable fellows when stirred up."

"Where shall we find the mullet?"

"Farther up the shore in shallow water. I saw you had a cast-net, so I didn't bring mine."

"We have a good one, though none of us can use it first-class."

"I think we can get some mullet with it. They make good bait for still fishing."

Macklin proved as good as his word. Half-an-hour's work provided the boys with all the bait they required, and they then started across the river to board the several boats.

CHAPTER IV.

FISHING.

Following Macklin's advice after boarding the sailboats, a desirable location soon was reached, and, just off of a point of land making out into the river, the three boats were so anchored that the several lines should not interfere, in event of their getting fast to a fish at the same time.

"I am placing you chiefly for sea-trout and channel bass, since you wish to hook something of good size, and there is always a chance for a cavalle," he explained to Jack, while they were jointing their rods. "The last is a right game fish, and makes lots of sport."

"Does the same bait serve for all?" inquired Jack, with interest.

"Fairly well," replied Macklin. "When trolling, however, I use a silver spoon or a phantom. A sea-trout is right game, too, and I've had one tear a phantom all to shreds before I could land him."

"The bass run largest, however, don't they?"

"Very much. I've seen bass weighing fifty pounds, but they average only about eight. The trout run from three to five pounds, and the cavalle average about five, though I have caught them as heavy as ten."

"Well, here's hoping we have good luck," cried Jack, as he arose to cast his line. "I've spit on my bait."

Macklin laughed and fixed a tempting piece of mullet on his hook.

"Is that a custom you have up North?" he asked.

"Yes, among others," smiled Jack. "Here goes!"

With the last he cast his line well out from the stern, intending to let the bait lie.

It scarce had struck the water, however, when there sounded the metallic click of his reel.

Then came a quick splash some twenty feet away, and the flash of a silver-gray body above the surface, vanishing instantly amid a shower of spray.

"Jiminy!" cried Jack, with a start. "I'm fast already."

"Let him run a few feet before you strike him," cried Macklin hurriedly.

Jack needed no advice in that respect, however, and in a moment the steady clicking of his reel evinced that the fish was securely hooked.

"I did not see him break, but it acts like a small bass," said Macklin, rising to watch Jack's movements.

"I'm fast to him all right."

"In that case I reckon you'll land him."

With a rapid clicking of the reel, Jack's line was pay-

ing out at a furious rate, and he saw that he was up against quite a game fish.

He let him run until fifty feet of the line stretched like an almost invisible thread to the point where it vanished into the river, then placed his thumb on the spool of the reel and further checked him.

Then there came a let up in the drag on the line, and then it suddenly went slack.

"Reel in!" exclaimed Macklin impulsively.

Jack already was taking in the line, however, and working as rapidly as possible.

He had recovered less than twenty feet, when the fish broke loose again, and made off like a flash.

Jack let him run till tired again, and then began once more to reel him in.

"It's a bass all right," said Macklin, still watching him.

"I hope so," said Jack.

The above operation was repeated, yet each time, as the struggling fish became more exhausted and nearly drowned in his own element, Jack got him nearer the boat.

Presently he succeeded in landing him, and a shout from the other boats, which were anchored some rods away, told him that his success had been witnessed.

He waved his hand in response, while Macklin hastened to unhook the flapping fish.

"Yes, it's a bass," said he, glancing up. "Only an average one."

"What will it weigh?"

"About five pounds."

"Gracious, but he was quite game!" exclaimed Jack.

"I can't imagine what one five times as heavy would do."

"He'd keep you right busy for a time," smiled Macklin. "You were lucky to hook this one so quickly. Ordinarily we have to wait for them. I reckon there must be a mascot in your party."

"Possibly," laughed Jack.

"In that case," added his companion, "you may yet hook onto a big one."

"Jiminy!" exclaimed Jack, with a glance at the other boats. "Lafe Lampton is fast now, and there goes Tom's line, too."

"Mascot is right, I reckon," said Macklin, with enthusiasm. "Get over again, and we'll give them a race."

Jack complied with alacrity.

In another minute all four lines were in the river, Lafe and Tom still fast, and playing their fish, both of which were successfully landed.

Before either was in, however, Macklin also had hooked one, and was busily at work.

Jack then caught on again, and this time he hooked a four-pound sea-trout.

From this time the sport was nearly incessant, one of the lines being fast most of the time, and Macklin again repeated that there must be a mascot in the party, or they had struck a day when fish were unusually plenty.

"It's great sport," declared Jack. "I never had such fun in this line."

"I'm glad you enjoy it, and that we are having such good luck."

"Luck hardly expresses it," laughed Jack. "It is more than luck."

The enthusiasm in the other boats was not a whit less, for all hands were doing great work, and Lafe Lampton was bellowing with excitement every time he hooked on.

For two hours the sport continued, till each boat had twenty times more fish than could be used; and Jack Lightfoot still was "rooting" hard to catch a very large one.

"When you were getting the fishline out of your kit, I noticed that you had a right good gun among your traps," remarked Macklin, during a brief lull in their sport.

"Yes, I have a fair one," replied Jack, seating himself on the rail of the boat. "I'll show it to you after we finish fishing."

"I take it, then, that you boys are fond of hunting."

"Yes, indeed, we all enjoy it. I think that hunting, particularly when after big game, is the finest of all sports."

"Did you ever go on a coon hunt?"

"No, I never did."

"There's some fun in that," laughed Macklin.

"I should like to try it once."

"You had better plan to go with me to-morrow."

"Are you going after coons?"

"I will go after some for your especial benefit, just to show you how it is done, if you and your friends will go with me."

"Well, that's very kind," cried Jack warmly. "I can speak for all hands."

"That you will go, or not?" smiled Macklin.

"We shall be delighted to go, every one of us."

"Not more than I shall be to have you."

"Then we will lay our plans for the hunting just as soon as we finish this——"

Jack abruptly stopped at this point, however, leaping down from his perch as if suddenly electrified.

The rod he held was bending nearly double.

Despite the firm grip he had had upon it, it had been almost wrenched out of his grasp.

Forty feet from the boat there now appeared on the calm surface of the water a fierce, furious swirl.

Out of this there showed for an instant only the sweeping tail of a huge fish, much too heavy to have broken unless greatly excited.

Then the reel on Jack's rod began fairly to shriek.

The line was spinning out with a rush that threatened both ratchet and rod.

Macklin leaped up with a shout, and with eyes dilating, crying excitedly:

"Thunderation, Jack, you've got a roncher!"

"What's a roncher?" gasped Jack, all of a quiver for a moment.

"A buster—a big one—the very one you've wanted to hook," cried Macklin, all in one breath. "Look out for your rod! He'll smash it if you're not careful."

Though at first greatly excited, Jack became cool in an instant.

He knew that his rod and gear were extremely light, and that only with exceeding skill and caution could he hope to land the fish to which he now appeared to be securely hooked.

His face took on a determined look, and his keen, dark eyes began to glitter.

Quickly bracing himself against the rail of the boat, he lowered the tip of his rod to reduce the strain, and also let the fine, thread-like line run more freely.

It was spinning out at the rate of a mile a minute.

Fifty, a hundred, went off the spool without a letting up for an instant.

"Gee, will he never quit!" muttered Jack.

"Check him gently, but don't try to hold him," advised Macklin, watching with bated breath.

Jack pressed his thumb to the spool, gently at first, then a little more firmly.

Still the line ran away with unabated speed till another one hundred feet had left the reel.

Then, so far away upon the river that it seemed as if he could have no possible connection with the occupants of the boat, the huge fish suddenly broke water, shooting several feet into the air, then turning amid a cloud of drops and spray, and vanished again with a terrific splash.

"It's a tarpon, and a fair-sized one," shouted Macklin triumphantly. "Keep him coming, Jack; keep him coming!"

The line had gone slack after the fish broke, and Jack now was reeling in the line with might and main, till he had regained something like fifty feet of it.

Then he caught the shooting fish again, whereupon the strain instantly was resumed, and he lost a hundred feet for the fifty he had recovered.

After a moment the fish broke water again, this time still farther away, and five minutes passed before Jack, who was working firmly yet with exceeding care, could reel in a yard of line.

For about a minute after the break, however, he got the fish coming, and took in nearly a hundred feet.

Then came another break, and a rush away, less prolonged than before.

"If the hook holds, Macklin, I'll get him all right," muttered Jack, with one quick glance at his interested companion. "But my rig is awful light."

"Yet he must have taken the hook securely, there's no doubt of that," cried Macklin quickly. "Play him easily, and take plenty of time."

"That's what I'm doing."

"It's your only chance."

"I'll take that chance, all right."

"You'll tire him out, Jack, if you keep at it."

"Let me alone to do the last," said Jack, with a quick, nervous laugh. "All I ask is that he will hang onto his end."

Many times the above maneuvers were repeated, and at the end of half-an-hour the fish still was a hundred feet or more from the motionless boat.

Tom Lightfoot and Lafe had discovered what was going on, and they now were perched on the rails of their boats, occasionally shouting a word of encouragement or advice.

Twice during the next fifteen minutes Jack got the fish so near that he could be plainly seen sailing to and fro in the water, yet only to have him dart away again the moment he saw the boat.

He had ceased to break water, however, and his movements were constantly becoming more sluggish, while the outer portion of the line cut this way and that through the water, as if only some great swinging weight was attached to it.

Presently, after repeated efforts, Jack had the spent fish reeled in so near that he sailed heavily by within a few feet of the boat.

Then Macklin hurriedly cried:

"Have you got a gaff aboard? He's too big for the net."

"Under the thwart," said Jack tersely. "Let me have it, please."

"Are you going to try to gaff him?" asked Macklin, in surprise.

"Sure!" cried Jack. "Win or lose, John, I'm going to do the whole business with this fellow."

"Good for you," was Macklin's reply of approval, as he promptly surrendered the gaff.

With the rod in his left hand, and in his right the stout gaff, Jack braced himself against the boat's rail, still playing the exhausted fish, and at times working him nearer.

Presently, after a little further skilful labor, Jack saw him come sailing alongside a foot or more under the water. Deftly guiding him by means of the rod, Jack leaned a little over the rail, firmly gripping the gaff.

Presently the stout iron hook suddenly shot downward followed by a quick, steady, upward haul, and over the rail came the floundering fish, landing in the standing-room with a thud that shook the motionless boat from stem to stern.

Now Jack threw up his hat, and uttered one loud: "Hurrah!"

It was echoed from the other boats, and both Lafe and Tom hurriedly went at breaking out their anchors, eager to have a closer inspection of the coveted prize, both knowing well enough that there would be no more fishing that day.

"You did well, Jack," cried Macklin, hastening to shake his companion's hand, and express his congratulations. "I never saw a fish handled more skilfully."

"I felt sure that I should accomplish it," replied Jack, flushed with pleasure and excitement. "Is it what you thought?"

"A tarpon?"

"Yes."

"That's what it is, Jack, and one of the largest I ever saw, around here. It must weigh close upon twenty-five pounds."

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING ABOUT COONS.

Naturally, Jack Lightfoot was much elated over his capture, yet he received the congratulations of his companions with becoming modesty, and all hands decided that enough fishing had been done for a single day.

It was well into the afternoon when the boys, accompanied by Macklin, secured the boats at the bank just below their camp and went ashore.

Their visitor surveyed things with an appreciative eye, the well-pitched tent, its comfortable interior, the

conveniences for cooking, and the precautions taken against rain and unwelcome intruders.

"This looks all right, Jack," said he finally. "You fellows seem to know your business."

"We know it when in Cranford, John," replied Lightfoot, with a laugh. "When so far away from home, however, amid strange scenes and after unfamiliar game, the aid and advice of a good friend is deeply appreciated."

Macklin colored with pleasure at this, and hastened to reply:

"I'm very glad to have been of some service to you. We were speaking of a coon hunt for to-morrow——"

"Dinner first," interrupted Jack, with a hearty laugh. "I'm as empty as a drum, and I guess I'm not alone. We'll discuss the coon hunt while we are filling the vacuum within."

"That suits me, Jack."

"Empty," cried Lafe, flying about to start a fire. "I'm more than empty. I could meet my waistband front and back, for all the grub there would be in the way."

"We'll soon fix that, boys," put in Tom. "In half-an-hour we'll have a fish dinner that will make your eyes stick out."

"Eyes be jiggered!" exclaimed Lafe. "They've been sticking out ever since daybreak. I've had trouble to poke them back. It's my stomach, Tom, my stomach. Let me get that sticking out where it belongs, and I'll be all right."

Macklin laughed at all this, and declared that he would remain to dinner upon being allowed to help get it, to which not the slightest objection was made.

Then the boys set to work with a will. The fire was built, the choicest fish were dressed, the lighter viands were brought from the locker in the tent, and soon the savory odor of frying fish mingled with sizzling salt pork, imbued the surrounding air.

"Gee, don't those smell good?" grinned Lafe, who was supervising the cooking to be sure the supply met the demand, "I don't think I ever sniffed anything quite as good as that."

"I believe your story," admitted Tom.

"Be sure you have them well browned, Lafe."

"You leave that to me, Tom. I'll have them well browned and plenty of 'em."

"I guess there's no doubt about the latter," laughed Jack, with a wink and smile at Macklin.

Nor was there any doubt of either, as a matter of fact; for a more savory and inviting meal a quartet of hungry campers never yet sat down to.

Half-an-hour was spent over it, during which Jack and his companions told Macklin considerable about Cranford and their many sports and interests in the far North; and when all were filled to repletion, Lafe close up to his top limit, Jack reverted to the hunting broached that morning by Macklin.

"I suppose a coon-hunt comes off at night, doesn't it?" he inquired.

Macklin laughed, and shook his head.

"None of that for me," said he. "Up North they are hunted after dark quite a good deal, also possums, but I don't fancy that. It's too tough a job, this running down and treeing a coon in the dark. The woods are too thick and too much swamp land down here."

"How do you hunt them?" asked Jack.

"I'd sooner run them to their holes by daylight."

"And then politely ask them to come out to be shot?" inquired Lafe jokingly.

"Not much," laughed Macklin. "I've got a couple of dogs that will dig out a coon in a way that will make you dizzy."

"Is that so?"

"And sometimes I smoke them out, but that's more bother and not so much like business."

"I suppose they are quite wicked little fellows," remarked Jack smiling.

"Not so very little, some of them," replied Macklin. "A coon is in a class by himself. He has the claws of an eagle, the teeth of a wolf, and the temper of a tiger. If he was as big as a tiger, boys, I'd match him to fight any animal that walks."

"I have heard that they are quite fierce when cornered."

"That's no name for it," smiled Macklin. "It's a sight to see when a big buck coon lets himself loose in a fight. I've seen one make a big mastiff turn tail in less than two minutes."

"How does a coon fight?"

"Flat on his back, tooth and nail, with his jaws snapping like those of a bear-trap, and every paw working for all it is worth. He'll make more hair fly in a minute than it would take to stuff a sofa."

"It must be quite a sight, indeed," laughed Jack.

"You see," added Macklin; "when a coon is fighting on his back, with his short neck shrunk down and his belly protected with all four paws, clawing like chain lightning, he's a right hard critter for a dog to fasten onto unless he knows his business. I've got a dog, though, that will make a coon look sick inside of a minute."

"They are pretty cunning, too, aren't they?" asked Tom, with characteristic interest.

"I reckon they are," grinned Macklin significantly. "There's more stealth and cunning and pure cussedness in a coon than in any animal on earth."

"So I have heard."

"They are as sly as a fox, eh?"

"Sly isn't any name for it," said Macklin. "A fox never was in it with a coon. I have seen a coon play off dead in a way that would deceive his own mother. You can kick one, tramp one under foot, and even stab him; but if the coon is feigning death he'll take his punishment without a quiver. It's a coon's last resort, though, make no mistake about that, while it's the possum's first thought."

"He'll not take that course while there's any other in sight, eh?" queried Jack.

"Never," declared Macklin. "He'd sooner fight, but, when fighting won't save him, I've seen one become as deceitful a live corpse as you could imagine."

"That's certainly amusing," smiled Lafe, a bit incredulously.

"It's all true, Lafe, every word of it," said Macklin.

"Are they quite plenty around here?" asked Jack.

"Thousands of them," was the reply, with obvious disgust. "They are an infernal nuisance, the pirates. They can climb a tree as well as a monkey, and they rob and kill about everything that comes in their way."

"What do they live upon?"

Macklin laughed.

"It would be easier to tell you what they don't eat," said he, a bit dryly. "Fowl, eggs, shell-fish, and crabs, rabbits, squirrels, rats, and moles, small birds, which they steal from their nests——"

"Gee whiz! a coon has a bigger appetite than I've got," put in Lafe laughing.

"With about as wide a range," added Jack, which brought a laugh from all hands.

"They eat frogs, too, and are right fond of oysters," continued Macklin. "They will squat out of sight on the seashore and watch a turtle lay her eggs, and then go dig them up and eat them. If ever there was an infernal pirate, boys, it's a coon."

"Are they found on this side of the river?"

"Rafts of them."

"We haven't seen any."

"Most likely they saw you first," laughed Macklin. "You could find coon tracks about here right easy, and if you then had a good dog he'd soon locate the coon, or his hole."

"Is that the way you hunt them?" asked Jack.

"That's generally the way I go after them."

"And you will go with us to-morrow?"

"I'd be right glad to, boys, if you wish to go," cried Macklin heartily. "I'll show you some fun, too."

"That's what we are looking for," cried Lafe. "Mebbe we could tree one."

"We might, but I don't look for that."

"What time shall we start?" inquired Tom.

"Right after breakfast, that's none too early," replied Macklin. "You can come over in one of your boats, and I'll meet you where I found you this morning."

"We'll come," said Jack promptly. "What do you say, Lafe?"

"I'm ready to start now," grinned Lafe.

"Morning will do," Jack rejoined. "Shall we bring only our guns along?"

"A gun is all you will need," nodded Macklin, rising to go. "I'll meet you at the river, then we'll go after them at once."

"Must you go so soon?" inquired Jack, as they all rose to see him away.

"Yes, I must be getting back home," replied Macklin.

"Well, we wish you to take most of the fish," said Jack. "We have no use for so many, and I understand that you can get them to the market and derive some profit from them."

"I can do that all right," smiled Macklin; "but I really don't feel like taking the fish from you."

"You'll confer us a favor, since we could not possibly dispose of them," insisted Jack. "We will put them all in your skiff, then I'll take her in tow with my boat, and save you the labor of rowing across."

"That's the stuff," supplemented Lafe. "We'll all run across with you."

This now was cheerfully agreed upon, and another hour was spent in transferring Macklin and the fish to the opposite bank. The sun was setting when the boys returned to their camp, well satisfied with the day's enjoyment, and all turned in quite early with vivid anticipations for the morrow.

CHAPTER VI.

A COON HUNT.

The following morning dawned clear and comfortably cool, and the Cranford boys were up and out with the sun.

"It's just the kind of a day for a hunt," announced

Jack, as all hands dashed down the bank, and took a plunge in the river.

"That's what it is," shouted Lafe. "None too hot; none too cool. I think it was made for us."

"As Macklin would say, it's a right good one," laughed Tom. "He, too, is a right good fellow."

To this none were inclined to take the slightest exception.

Inigorated by a delightful bath, the boys speedily prepared and despatched a hearty breakfast, and then put their camp in shape to leave for the day.

This required less than an hour, and it was barely seven o'clock when all hands boarded Jack's boat and got her under way.

Only a light air was stirring, and, while they were crossing the river, Jack got out the several guns and a plentiful supply of shells, that all might be in readiness when they were joined by Macklin.

As they drew nearer the west bank, the barking of dogs was borne to their ears, and Tom presently cried:

"They are his dogs, boys. Yonder he comes through the hamak."

It was Macklin, all right, and they heard his distant shout when he saw them.

All hands stood up and returned it, waving their arms in greeting, and a half minute later the sail was dropped on the run, and the boat glided gently to the bank on which their friend stood waiting.

Greetings were quickly passed, the sail neatly furled, and the boat secured, and then the boys sprang ashore, guns in hand, and were ready to start on the coon hunt.

Macklin was accompanied by two noisy dogs, which, by their actions and eagerness, plainly showed that they knew what was in the wind.

One was a curious-looking mongrel, as rangy as a wolf, but with a remarkably keen eye and a formidable set of sharp, white teeth.

"That's Jim," remarked Macklin, giving the dog an affectionate prod with his gun.

"He's not very handsome," laughed Jack.

"Beauty doesn't count for much in a coon hunt," replied Macklin. "Despite his looks, Jim is one of the best coon dogs in the State."

"Is the other a good one?"

"Zip is pretty good, only too rattle-headed," replied Macklin. "He'd have been chewed up forty times if it hadn't been for Jim. I have taught Jim what to do and just what I want, and he knows as much about coon-hunting as I do."

Jack surveyed the lank, scrawny fellow with added interest.

"Zip is in too much of a hurry to tackle a coon, and always loses his head," added Macklin. "He'd go into a coon's hole the moment he found it, and before I could reach the spot. I've taught Jim to fight him off till I arrive, however, and he knows just what's expected of him. He's a great coon dog."

Jack glanced at Zip, and saw that his neck and nose were frightfully scarred, and the hair missing in places over his hide, and he promptly decided that Macklin knew what he was talking about.

Their talk had occurred while Tom and Lafe were leaving the boat in shape, and the latter were no sooner ashore than Macklin said:

"Now we'll be off, boys, if you're ready. The sooner we get at it the better."

"Let her go!" cried Lafe. "I'm just aching for the sport to begin."

"You'll see enough of it," laughed their host.

He now led the way through the hamak, the restless dogs yelping on ahead, while the Cranford boys followed with their guns under their arms.

The way led over a slightly rising upland, and through a belt of woods, at a break in which they presently arrived, from which Macklin showed them where he lived, and a plantation in which his father was interested.

"We'll stop at the house on our return," said he; "for I'd like to have you meet my people."

"We shall be glad to do so," said Jack.

"Just now, however, we have more important business," laughed Macklin. "We'll go this way, boys, and make through yonder woods toward one of the swamps."

"Do you hunt coons in the swamps?" inquired Lafe, plugging along with a grunt.

"No, not often," replied Macklin. "But the swamp coons are larger than those that frequent the uplands, and I'm going after them to-day. We shall find their holes all right, once let Jim get onto the tracks of one."

While speaking, Macklin was leading the way across a broad strip of open ground, from which he struck back of some outbuildings at the rear of his father's plantation. From there their course again was through the woods for a half-mile or more, when they came to another break, and in the distance could see a lower section of country thickly grown with trees and dense shrubbery.

"There is a big swamp out yonder, the one to which we are going," explained Macklin.

"Are we going into it?" asked Lafe.

"Not much! We shall find some coon tracks in the nearer woods," replied Macklin, as they briefly halted. "We can see them plainly enough in the sandy soil, and shall find the coon holes in the dry land well away from the swamp."

The last was barely out of his mouth when, from the depths of the woodland off to the right, the furious yelping of one of the dogs, both of which had been scurrying out of sight for some little time, rose noisily on the morning air.

"That's Zip!" exclaimed Macklin. "He has struck a trail already. There'll be no holding him, but we'll find Jim there all right. Follow me!"

He started away with the last, and the Cranford boys, thrilled with the first flush of excitement, broke into a run and followed him.

Their course took them through the woods for a considerable distance, and they overtook Macklin just as he arrived at the edge of a sort of clearing, where the tree and scrub were much less dense.

There was no sign of Zip, however, though his furious yelps could be heard in the distance.

Yet as Macklin had predicted, here they found Jim excitedly dashing to and fro over a clear portion of the ground, now with his nose to the earth, now with his gleaming eyes raised with swift, appealing glances to his master's face, as only a dog would act who knew that he should not go until he got the word.

"I told you we'd find him," shouted Macklin, as Jack and his companions came rushing up. "After him, Jim! Sic him, old boy!"

Instantly the dog was off like a flash, yelping furiously, with his nose to the ground, and every muscle quivering with excitement.

Macklin paused only for a moment to study the several faint tracks in the sandy soil.

"Here they are, boys," he cried, as all hands rushed to the spot. "We've struck a trail, all right."

"Are those coon tracks?" panted Lafe.

"Yes, indeed, as plain and large as a baby's foot," cried Macklin. "It's a big one, boys. Come on, we must follow the dogs."

"How can we find them?"

"You'll hear them sing when they run him to cover."

"They'll have him all torn up before we get there."

"Not much! It's not so easy to settle a big buck coon."

Much of the last was said while the four boys were tearing through the woods after the dogs, neither of which could now be seen, though their yelping was heard in the distance.

It was rough going over the countless protruding roots and breaking through the numerous trailing vines, and Lafe Lampton was down on his hands and knees nearly as much as upon his feet.

Yet he scrambled on persistently, red in the face, and sweating like a fighting trooper.

Presently all hands came to the edge of the woods again, and now caught sight of Jim in the distance.

He looked more like a black streak than a dog, crossing a strip of open ground an eighth of a mile away.

"Come on, boys!" yelled Macklin, breaking away at the top of his speed. "This kind of sport will test your wind."

"You'll find that we have wind enough," replied Jack. "You'd know it if you followed us at hare and hounds just once over Cranford hills."

Thoroughly imbued with the excitement, the boys now tore on across the open land, quickly reaching the spot where they last had seen Jim, who had again disappeared beyond the trees and shrubbery off at one side of the swamp, which they had been rapidly approaching.

Half-a-minute later the loud, continuous barking of one of the dogs reached their ears, and Macklin quickly shouted:

"That's Zip again! He has him holed!"

"How do you know that?" panted Lafe, plunging on with the rest despite the weight he carried.

"By this bark," replied Macklin. "Now they both have reached the hole."

"Come on," yelled Jack, increasing his speed. "Don't let up any."

"Not a let up!" echoed Tom.

On they tore, guns in hand, as excited as either of the dogs by the furious barking of which they were guided.

The sound took them around a bend of the swamp growth a hundred yards or so away, and here they again sighted the dogs some fifty feet distant.

Then Macklin's predictions were verified again.

Zip was trying fiercely to begin digging into a dark round hole in the dry soil, close under a little bluff, that appeared above the ground for a short distance.

With every attempt Zip made, however, Jim set upon him from behind, snapping sharply at his flank and legs, and repeatedly compelling him to turn from the coon hole and defend himself.

"I have taught Jim to do that," explained Macklin, as all hands hurried forward.

"But what's your idea in so doing?" asked Tom, who chanced to be the nearest.

"You'll soon see," laughed Macklin, almost breathlessly. "A coon is a right wicked critter when he's just dug out, and I don't want my dogs chewed up before I get near enough to help them. So I taught Jim, who learns easily, to keep Zip out of the hole till I show up."

"I see," nodded Tom.

"And you'll see my reason for it in about two shakes of a lamb's tail," added Macklin, as they all came rushing nearer the spot.

Jim had turned again, and was looking wistfully at his master, half whining, half barking all the while.

Zip, however, had his head rammed into the coon hole, and was making the sand and dirt fly in a cloud behind him.

Macklin's first move was a mad dash at Zip.

Grabbing the excited dog by the tail, he gave a violent haul, and yanked him from the coon hole, then tossed him ten feet away.

"Keep quiet, drat you!" he roared angrily.

Yet the yelping dog instantly bounded back to resume operations.

"Be quiet, I say!" shrieked Macklin; "or I'll kick your ugly head off!"

Then, with some little difficulty, he succeeded in getting the frenzied animal by the scruff of his neck, firmly restraining him and soundly boxing his ears.

At the same time he cried to Jack and his companions: "Spread out a little there, boys! I've known a coon to bolt from his hole before he could be dug out."

"What shall we do in that case?" asked Jack. "Shall we shoot at him at once?"

"Shoot him, if he runs, but not until he is clear of the dogs."

"Don't be alarmed," cried Jack. "We'll be careful not to hit either of them."

"And look out that you don't shoot one another," added Macklin, still kneeling upon the ground and gripping Zip by the neck.

"We'll be careful."

"Stand so that you will not fire in each other's direction."

"Oh, we'll not lose our heads, Macklin," Jack now replied, observing the nature of the former's misgivings. "We'll keep cool, and know where we are shooting, make no mistake about that."

"'Nuff said," returned Macklin, with a nod of approval. "Now watch the dirt fly."

Still holding Zip by the scruff of the neck, he now turned to the other dog, whose self-restraint appeared almost human, and cried sharply:

"At him, Jim! Get after him, old boy! Sic him!"

The effect upon the dog was electrical.

No ferret ever went into a rat-hole as Jim went into that of the coon.

In an instant his head was buried out of sight, while his front paws went at digging out the hole in a way quite amazing.

They moved like twin streaks of lightning.

The dirt and sand rose behind him in a veritable cloud and shower.

The moment a mound gathered under him and in his way, he cleared it to one side or behind him with his rear paws, all the while digging with the other two as if for dear life, and momentarily going deeper into the coon hole.

"Gee whiz! I should think that he was seeing how quickly he can dig through to China!" cried Lafe, with eyes staring.

"Quick work, eh?"

"You bet!"

"You'll hear a snarl from the coon right soon, unless the hole proves to be a deep one," said Macklin, with a laugh.

He was still kneeling beside Zip and checking him, while the dog was furiously barking, despite all efforts to silence him.

"Are you sure that he's in there?" asked Jack, with his gun ready for instant use.

"I'm as sure of it as that I am out here," cried Macklin confidently. "Unless Jim wakes him up right quick, the hole must be a deep one."

"I should think so."

"In that case, I'll call him out for a spell, and give this crazy loon a chance. Shut up, drat you!"

"Keep quiet!"

Half-a-minute passed.

Not a sound came from the hole, except the incessant, half-smothered growling of Jim and the noise of his furious clawing and the falling sand and dirt.

"I reckon I'll give him a breathing spell," cried Macklin, after a moment.

"I should think it was time he had one," put in Lafe.

Then Macklin suddenly sprang up, and whistled sharply, at which Jim, who appeared to be trained to a nicety, quickly backed out of the hole.

"Now get after him, you lunatic!" cried Macklin, releasing the other dog.

Instantly Zip went into the hole, like a shot out of a gun.

A more furious growling never was heard than he at once set up.

Paws never moved faster than his began to move, front and rear. They went at the job like a piece of electrical machinery, yet with half-an-eye the Cranford boys could see that he was not accomplishing as much as Jim had done, and that the latter was by far the better and more finely trained dog.

Jim was now shaking the sand from his head and eyes, and taking in a fresh invoice of wind.

Another minute passed.

Still nothing from the hole except Zip's furious growl and the tip of his quivering tail.

Macklin presently seized the latter, and yanked him out again, then sharply commanded:

"Get at him, Jim! Fetch him out here! Fetch him out here, Jim!"

Jim was out of sight in the hole before the first word was fairly uttered.

In ten seconds there came from the hole one prolonged yowl and snarl, the like of which the Cranford boys never had heard. It was fit to set one's teeth on edge.

"That's him!" yelled Macklin, leaping up and grabbing his gun.

"The coon?"

"Don't shoot unless he bolts!" Macklin excitedly shrieked. "You'll hit one of the dogs if you do! There'll be an awful mix-up here in a moment. Look out! Here he comes!"

Every nerve of the Cranford boys was quivering as if with frenzy.

Lafe Lampton's eyes were sticking straight out of his head.

They beheld something black, a mixture of dog and coon, suddenly come out of the hole, along with such yowling and growling as would turn a million cats green with envy.

Jim had the coon by one ear.

The ear tore away, and something black flew bang against the nearest tree.

It was the coon.

In an instant he was flat on his back.

Then, oh, what a picture of hustle and tussle!

The dogs and coon in one complex, entangled, utterly indescribable fight, blind, fierce, and furious, rough-and-tumble, scratch, tear, and bite, all in a way to turn one's head to watch it.

It was a cyclone of scuffling, jumping, snapping, clawing, spitting, and tearing, with yelps of pain, snarls of rage, and frenzied clicking and clashing of teeth.

It was a sight one would see only at a coon hunt, and for twenty seconds the din was something appalling, and the air filled with flying fur and hair.

The maddened dogs, wild with the taste of blood, went at the coon with every tooth and toe-nail.

The coon, fighting for dear life, snarled, clawed, bit, and scratched, in a way that threatened to tear the flesh and eyes from the dogs' faces.

It was utterly impossible to shoot the coon without hitting one of the dogs, and Macklin suddenly sprang nearer, with his gun clubbed.

Jim saw him coming, and leaped to one side.

Zip shrank back for a single instant.

In that one instant the coon came up like a flash of gunpowder suddenly ignited, and bolted to escape.

"Shoot!" shrieked Macklin.

Lafe could not have fired in time to have killed the coon to have saved his own life.

He was all in, as the saying is, with dizzy, confusing, blinding excitement.

In an instant, Jack Lightfoot, however, before the coon was twenty feet away, clapped his gun to his shoulder.

Bang! bang!

Both barrels in quick succession.

And through the veil of smoke wafted upward, Jack saw the coon give just one convulsive leap in the air, claw and quiver for an instant while there, and then drop with a thud to the ground—a dead coon!

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom. "Good shot, Jack!"

"Capital!" exclaimed Macklin, hastening to drive off the dogs. "He's as dead as a door-nail."

"No feigning this time, eh?" cried Jack, rushing nearer to examine the lifeless animal.

"Not a bit of it," laughed Macklin, turning the carcass over with the toe of his boot. "He's all in Jack, and he's a right big fellow."

"He is, indeed," declared Lightfoot, while he and Tom bent down to examine the animal more closely.

"What did you think of that, Lafe?" asked Macklin.

Lafe had seated himself on the nearest fallen pine, an indescribable picture of ludicrous perplexity.

"I've just got round where I can think again," he replied, after a moment. "I thought I'd seen a good, lively scrimmage or two in my day, Macklin, but I'll be bamfoozled if that didn't take anything I've ever seen look about as pale and sickly as a yellow dog in a den of lions! I say!"

"Well?"

"Did it take a minute, Macklin, or an hour? I'm blessed if I can tell, now that it's ended."

"It took about thirty seconds, Lafe," replied Macklin, laughing heartily at the other's humor. "The next one may take longer, or possibly not so long."

"Then there is to be another, eh?" cried Lafe eagerly.

"Why, certainly! We've only just started in."

"Just started in!" echoed Lafe, with eyes dilating. "Did you hear that, Jack?"

"Certainly I heard it," cried Jack, rising to his feet. "Aren't you game for another one of them?"

"One!" roared Lafe, with a ringing laugh. "Jiminy beeswax! I think I'd be game to hunt those critters from now until dark."

"We'll find others all right," said Macklin, evidently much pleased with the enthusiasm the boys were displaying. "After you rest a bit, and get your wind, we'll start out after another."

"Wind!" exclaimed Lafe, leaping up. "Don't let's stop to get any wind. I can't wait to see another bout like that come off."

"All right, boys," smiled Macklin. "I'm ready when you are."

CHAPTER VII.

AN UGLY INTRUDER.

To follow the boys farther during the sport of that morning would, for the most part, be but a repetition of what already has been described, varied only now and then by unimportant incidents or details.

Under the guidance of Macklin, however, the day's sport proved to be all that he had promised them, and these new and stirring scenes were enjoyed at a goodly premium over their face value.

Nine coons were cornered and slain before midday, the tenth one only a little later, and then all hands decided that they had had enough in that line for a spell.

It was after one o'clock when they came tramping homeward through the woods, a good bit tired, if the truth were told; and it was with a feeling of genuine satisfaction that they arrived at the Macklin dwelling, and in the shade of one of the broad verandas found shelter from the midday sun.

Something more substantial presently was found, moreover, which went to show that Macklin had not only planned to arrive home at about this hour, but also that ample provision should be ready for the wants and enjoyment of his new friends.

First his parents and an elder sister were brought out, and introduced to them, the genial manners of whom quickly won the liking of all, and then the boys were invited into the dining-room to as bountiful and luscious a repast as the larder of a superior Southern home could furnish.

No mistake, Macklin had done himself proud, as the saying is, and the Cranford boys passed three as delightful hours with the family as they had enjoyed since saying farewell to the snow-clad hills and beloved scenes in the far-distant North.

Not one of them, as he sat there in this home environment that perfect afternoon, but was carried back in mind to those far-away scenes and the dear ones fondly awaiting their return; and not one of them but felt, with a quicker throb of the swelling heart, the first thrill of that insinuating yearning known as—homesickness.

"I hope we shall see you again before you break camp on the other side, Mr. Lightfoot," said Mrs. Macklin, when the time drew near for the boys to make their departure.

Jack regarded her motherly face in silence for a moment, and felt his eyes grow strangely dim and moist.

"I thank you very much for all of us, Mrs. Macklin, but I do not think it probable," he replied politely.

"Indeed! I am right sorry to hear that."

"And I feel sorry that we shall not be able to visit you again, for you have been very kind and hospitable," bowed Jack. "Furthermore, we have grown to regard your son with more than ordinary feelings of friendship. But our plans are already laid, Mrs. Macklin, and at dawn to-morrow we shall break camp, and start up the river."

"So soon?"

"I feel that we should return to Mr. Linscott's place by Saturday, as on Monday we shall start for our homes in the North. So I fear that we must say farewell this afternoon."

"I was hoping to see more of you, and to hear of your life and interests at home," smiled the lady; "but you naturally must be governed by all the circumstances. I'm sure that my son will miss you greatly after your departure."

"That's right, Jack," nodded Macklin, from a hammock near by. "I'm right sorry you are going."

"You must come up to Cranford, then, and spend a month with us," smiled Jack, as he arose to go. "There will always be a hearty welcome for you at my home——"

"Or at ours," put in Tom, for Lafe and himself.

"Well, thank you all, boys, and some day I may come," said Macklin, a bit huskily. "I shall remember you all for many a day, Jack, and, when you reach home, I hope you'll think of me now and then, and write to me."

"That I will, John, and all of us," cried Jack. "Though many miles may part us, we will not drop our pleasant friendship, I give you my word on that."

For obvious reasons, it was a regretful parting, yet the hour had come and the final word to the family was said.

Macklin accompanied the boys down to the river, however, promising to see them again before they got under way in the morning, and they left him standing on the bank, gazing soberly after them, as their light craft was wafted over the river.

"It seems a bit too bad, Jack, doesn't it?" remarked Lafe, after a moment.

"Yes, yet the best of friends must part," replied Jack firmly.

"Do we really head up the river to-morrow?"

"That's what, boys."

"Took it into your head quite abruptly, didn't you?"

"Yes, quite."

"When you sat on the veranda with Mrs. Macklin?"

"That was when."

"I felt a little that way myself, Jack," admitted Tom, with a nod.

"All play and no work makes Jack a dull boy," quoth Jack cheerily. "We have been away for some time. We have seen some of Florida, and enjoyed some rare sports, boys; but there must come an end to it soon, and we are due at Mr. Linscott's place on Saturday. I laid my plans for that when we sat on Macklin's veranda. If it rests with me, boys, I say—up the river to-morrow."

"So do I," cried Tom heartily.

"And I," added Lafe warmly.

Then they all shook hands over it, for they knew that this turn up-stream meant the shaping of a course for home.

The sun was setting while they crossed the river, and it was out of view before the light air brought them to the east bank.

Already the Florida twilight was taking the place of day, and the change to dusk was of brief duration.

The shadows of the trees were darkening the river as they approached the bank and dropped sail, securing the boat to one of the others which were made fast a rod or more below the camp.

Taking their guns, they sprang out on the bank, then picked their way toward the clearer place in the shrub where their tent was pitched.

Suddenly, Jack Lightfoot, who was just in advance of his companions, halted.

"Hush!" he whispered, quickly slipping his gun to the hollow of his arm.

"What's the matter?" muttered Tom, stealing nearer to his cousin's elbow.

"There's something wrong here, Tom."

"Something wrong?"

"Where?" whispered Lafe, awed for a moment.

"At our camp."

"I don't see anything," growled Lafe.

"There is something at those fish-heads and stuff which we buried in the sand," Jack softly declared,

crouching to peer through the intervening scrub, to discover what the object was which he could see only imperfectly through the falling dusk.

Even while he spoke, however, there rose on the still air a single, threatening snarl, and with it the crunching of flesh and bones, while through the semi-darkness there suddenly gleamed two bright spots of light, like twin balls of living fire.

"Thundering guns!" gasped Jack, all of a sudden.

"It's a wildcat!"

"A wildcat!"

"One that has found the fish we buried, and dug it up."

"The dickens!" growled Lafe, under his breath.

"He'll be uglier than seven devils, if disturbed at food," whispered Jack, in rising excitement.

"What's to be done?" queried Tom.

"I'm bound to kill him, if it takes a leg!" declared Jack.

"Give him both barrels, then," muttered Lafe grimly.

"Let him have both barrels."

Jack hesitated.

"I don't know whether I'm charged heavily enough for him," he hurriedly whispered. "Thundering guns! I wish I could get hold of my Winchester rifle."

"Where is it?"

"In the tent."

"Loaded?"

"Sure! With five slugs. I could kill him with the rifle, all right."

"Can't we get it?"

"It's a long chance," muttered Jack, a bit doubtfully.

"Look at the creature's eyes. He is down on the bank, less than twenty feet in front of our tent. If we approach, we may get more than we can handle. He'll not leave those fish, and he might attack us. Hear him snarl! I'll bet he hears us, even if he doesn't see us yet."

This conversation was carried on in cautious whispers, while the boys crouched in the scrub, a dozen yards from the clearing in front of the tent.

By parting the low branches just in front of them, they could see more plainly, as their eyes became accustomed to the dusk, and a sudden move from the animal brought him into better view.

Constantly uttering a low growl, the wildcat crept around the hole he had made when digging out the buried fish, which Jack Lightfoot rightly inferred that he had discovered, and was now bent upon devouring unmolested.

Now the boys, naturally thrilled with mingled apprehensions and excitement, could see the huge feline crouching almost upon the ground.

"He hears us, and has crept round so that he can look this way," whispered Jack.

"Gee! see his eyes glow!"

"He probably thinks that some other animal is here, bent upon getting part of his fish," said Jack, with his gaze riveted upon the creature.

"I guess that's right, Jack."

"He'd probably fight like all possessed, if molested."

"You bet he would!" put in Lafe, in a cautionary way. "How would it do, Jack, to plug him with all three guns at once?"

"I'm afraid we're not charged heavily enough to kill him outright," whispered Jack. "They die mighty hard, you know, and if we only succeed in wounding him, he may put up more of a fight than we want. None of us is looking to get badly clawed or bitten by the cuss."

"I should say not!"

"I'm going to try to get my rifle," Jack decidedly whispered, after a moment.

"Don't take too long chances, Jack," cautioned Tom. "We'd much better make tracks, and lose him, than have you injured, and possibly scarred for life."

"I think we can kill him," replied Jack. "I've got my plans laid."

"What are they?"

"You stay here, Tom, and be ready to shoot instantly," whispered Jack. "Lafe and I will steal around through the scrub, and I will station him about a rod over yonder, where he also can cover the beast with his gun."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to make a short circuit, and try to steal back of our tent, keeping it between me and the wildcat," explained Jack, in hurried whispers. "If I can do that without being attacked, and then raise the rear flap of the tent, I can reach inside, and get my Winchester. I know just where I left it lying."

"Jiminy! That looks pretty desperate," muttered Lafe.

"Desperate or not, Lafe, I'm going to try it," insisted Jack, with a determined gleam in his dark eyes.

"What do you want me to do?"

"When you are stationed, Lafe, I want both of you to keep the wildcat constantly covered," said Jack. "If he makes a move in my direction or yours, or toward the tent, let him have both guns instantly."

"That's the stuff!" whispered Lafe.

"Do you understand, Tom?"

"Sure!"

"Don't shoot unless he moves," added Jack. "I'll drop him dead with a single bullet, if I can get my rifle. Now watch him, Tom, for Lafe and I are going."

"Trust me," nodded Tom.

Then he crouched lower, and thrust his gun-barrel through the low branches.

The wildcat, constantly growling and glaring in that direction, was crouching on the ground, with his jaws fiercely crunching the fish.

Jack and Lafe crept around to a point from which aim could be had at nearly a right angle with that of Tom, and Jack now said softly:

"Stop here, Lafe. This is all right."

"I'll drop back of this brush, and cover him from above it," whispered Lafe, bending to one knee, and thrusting his gun-barrel forward.

"Good enough!" murmured Jack. "Now I'll try to reach the tent."

"Keep your eyes and ears open," cautioned Lafe.

"You bet!"

The tent was about a rod away, down the slight incline making toward the river.

Between it and the edge of the bank the wildcat was still crouching, now quite plainly visible to all of the boys.

With the cunning and distrust characteristic of the cat family, however, he evidently had begun to suspect that designs against him had been formed. Though he still held a huge fish-head between his sharp claws, he had now stopped eating, and was growling more fiercely than ever.

Firmly gripping his gun, and holding it ready to shoot instantly, Jack Lightfoot crouched low in the scrub, and began to pick his way toward the tent.

Not a sound came from the other boys, who now were kneeling, with their eyes flashing over their gun-barrels.

After a moment, Jack reached a position which brought the tent between himself and the animal, when he had to depend upon his hearing alone to tell what the creature was doing.

Dropping to his hands and knees upon emerging from the scrub, Jack next crept silently toward the rear of the tent, picking his way with the utmost caution, and carefully avoiding every dry leaf and twig.

After half-a-minute he succeeded in reaching the tent, and he then laid down his gun, and quietly drew up one of the small stakes which held the canvas to the ground.

By raising it a little, he could thrust his arm inside, and, after groping about for a moment, his hand came in contact with the rifle.

He felt a thrill of satisfaction and relief as he quietly drew the weapon from under the flap, then dropped the latter in place.

He scarce had done so, however, when the wildcat acted upon the distrust which long had been plainly obvious. With a single furious snarl, he suddenly bounded up and to one side, yet for an instant appeared uncertain from which direction to expect an attack.

It was settled quickly enough, for a spiteful flash of fire instantly leaped from among the scrub in two places, and the thundering reports of the weapons rang as one on the still evening air.

Their aim was true to the mark, yet the scattering shot served only to wound the animal, the maddened screech of which was fairly mingled with the deafening reports.

"Look out, Jack!" shrieked Tom instantly. "He's coming your way!"

With a tremendous bound, the wildcat had leaped toward the tent, alighting upon the ground off to one side of it, and less than a dozen feet from where Jack Lightfoot then was kneeling.

Jack caught sight of the ugly body as it came through the air—a sight that would have shaken the nerve of many an experienced hunter.

Instantly, however, Jack's rifle leaped to his shoulder, and his eye flashed along the trusty barrel.

Bang!

The huge cat gave one more convulsive leap, turned sideways in the air, then fell with a loud thud to the ground, scarce ten feet from the cool-headed marksman, with a bullet imbedded in its brain.

"Are you all right, Jack? Did you kill him?" roared Lafe Lampton, rushing down to lend aid, in case it was needed.

"Dead as a door-nail!" cried Jack, as he lowered the smoking weapon from his shoulder. "It was quick work, Lafe, but he made a perfect mark."

"And it's a perfect specimen, Jack; there's no doubt of that."

The last came from Tom Lightfoot, who also had hurried to the spot, and he impulsively seized his cousin by the hand, and shook it warmly.

"You have done finely," he declared heartily. "It required more courage than I have got, Jack, ten times over."

"No, I don't think so, Tom," was the reply, with a slightly nervous laugh. "If you had wanted to kill a wildcat as badly as I have, I'm sure you would have done no less."

"Gammon!" said Tom. "I'd have let the cat go to thunder!"

"As you say, it appears to be a fine specimen."

"That's what it is," put in Lafe. "It's a buster."

All of the boys were not a little relieved that the adventure had ended so favorably, and some time was spent in an interested examination of the dead animal.

"I shall skin him in the morning," declared Jack; "and have the skin stuffed to put in our shed room. It will make a fine trophy to remind us of this Florida cruise."

"That it will, Jack," assented Tom.

"I hope that no more of them will come prowling around here to-night!" growled Lafe, with a glance toward the scrub. "One is enough for me."

"We'll bury that fish again, that the odor may not attract any," replied Jack, leading the way down the bank. "I do not think that we'll be visited by another."

His prediction proved correct, for the night passed without any disturbance.

Early the following morning Jack removed the cat's skin, salting and rolling it carefully, to prevent decay, then stowed it away in his boat.

In accordance with their plans of the previous day, the boys broke camp immediately after breakfast, and began putting things in shape for their return cruise up the river.

About seven o'clock Macklin rowed over in his skiff, and was not a little surprised to hear of their adventure with the wildcat, which he declared was one of the largest he had seen.

He remained with the Cranford boys till the last moment, repeating his regret over their departure, and there was a genuine sadness in his frank eyes as they all shook hands for the last time, and boarded their boats.

CHAPTER VIII.

WRECKED.

It is said of the Indian River that it can get up a heavier blow at shorter notice than almost any other body of water of its size in the world.

The Cranford boys had no good reason for doubting this statement. As a matter of fact, they would have been much inclined to emphasize it, after the experience to which they were treated before the end of their stirring cruise.

This did not occur until Saturday afternoon, when, as nearly as they could judge, not perfectly recalling their unfamiliar surroundings, they could not be very many miles from their destination, Mr. Linscott's plantation.

They knew they should recognize his place, however, as soon as they came in sight of it.

Their return trip up the river had been uneventful, barring some successful trolling for fish, and about four o'clock on the day mentioned all three boats were beating up-stream, close-hauled against a sharp wind from the northwest.

It had sprung up within the past quarter hour, veering sharply from the southwest, and almost immediately all three boys had been compelled to double-reef against its increasing violence.

Heavy clouds had shut out the sun since noon, moreover, and huge dark banks were rolling up from the northwest, lending additional wildness to the threatening scene.

Lashed into turbulent waves by the violent wind, the wide river presented the most ragged appearance the Cranford boys had yet seen, and all were becoming drenched by the spray thrown up by their light crafts, as they labored against the increasing gale.

With the frequent tacking that was necessary, the boats were at times widely separated, at others running quite close together, and it was on one of the latter occasions that Lafe cried out to Jack, with his voice raised to a roar to make himself heard above the rush of the wind:

"I say, old man! This is kind of wicked, isn't it?"

"It is, for a fact, Lafe," Jack yelled back, bending to gaze under his buckling boom.

"How long are you going to stick to it?"

"I'd like to stick it out till we reach Mr. Linscott's place," shouted Jack.

"Got any idea how far away 'tis?"

"None very definite," replied Jack, still yelling at the top of his lungs. "As near as I can tell, we are quite a distance above the camp where we stopped the first night. We ought not to be very many miles from home."

"Tom is laboring pretty hard off yonder," shouted Lafe, bracing hard against his tiller and pointing off across the river.

"Is that so, Lafe?"

"His craft isn't as stiff as ours."

Jack peered under his boom, and gazed across at his cousin's boat.

She was heeled over till her lee rail was awash, close-hauled on a starboard tack, and fairly tearing through the rough water.

A look of anxiety crept over Jack's drenched face.

"I suppose we might make a landing until the worst of it blows over," he shouted to Lafe, who was running on the same tack with himself, and only a moderate distance away.

"I guess the worst is yet to come, all right," returned Lafe.

"It looks so."

"That sky is mighty wicked. I wouldn't wonder if we got a cyclone."

"Not quite as bad as that, I guess, but a genuine howling norther."

"Well, what do you say?" demanded Lafe.

"Ease off a little, and we'll run over to Tom, and see what he thinks about it."

"He'll think just as we do."

"I guess that's right."

"He wouldn't give in unless you suggested it, not if it blew a hurricane."

Jack knew this to be true, and he ducked under his boom again, and had another look at his plucky cousin.

"He appears to be going all right, Lafe," he shouted.

"If we make a landing, we may be hung up over another night."

"There's a good chance of it."

"I don't fancy making camp again, yet we might have to if we stopped. It will come dark in a couple of hours."

"That's right."

"I'd rather keep on, Lafe, if we can muckle the weather."

"I'm game to keep on," roared Lafe, above the crashing of the waves against his boat's quarter. "All I'm thinking about is Tom."

"I'd shift boats with him, only it would be next to impossible in this ugly mess," shouted Jack. "He is tacking now, and will stand over this way."

"So I see."

"I'll hail him when near enough."

All this conversation was yelled by the boys at the top of their lungs, as the two boats tore onward nearly side by side, toward the east bank of the ragged-looking river.

An eighth of a mile away Tom Lightfoot had just come into the wind to make a tack.

His boat was dancing like a feather in the tremendous sea, and her sail was slatting as if to tear itself to shreds.

For a moment it looked as if the wind and waves

would get the better of him, but presently the canvas filled again, and the boat gathered headway, plunging her nose out of sight in the turbulent water, and then listing heavily, as she tore on under the furious blast.

Jack saw about where she must cross him, and, with a quick luff, he yanked in a foot or more of his sheet, and bore closer to the wind.

His design was to pass near enough to Tom to make himself heard.

In thirty seconds the two boats were rushing toward one another at a sharp angle, and were less than fifty yards apart.

Now Jack eased off a little, to give his cousin the right of way, intending to pass directly astern of him.

Bracing hard against his tiller, Jack leaned forward a little, and shouted:

"How are you doing, Tom?"

Tom looked a bit pale, partly because of the cold wind and drenching he was getting, yet he answered lustily:

"All right, Jack."

"Can you handle her without any accident?"

"I think so."

"She's not as stiff as she might be."

"That's the trouble."

"We'll make a landing, Tom, if you say so?"

"Don't make it on my account," yelled Tom. "I'd rather reach home, if we can."

"So would I, but it's going to blow even harder," cried Jack, when they were scarcely twenty yards apart.

"If you think there is any doubt about your boat, we'll quit till the wind blows itself out."

"I'm not afraid."

"Good enough! We'll stick to it, then, till we sight——"

"Thunderation!"

The last came from Tom with a shriek of dismay, a shriek that was instantly drowned by the rising tumult.

At the worst possible moment, just as Jack was speeding almost under the lee rail of his cousin's boat, really too near for safety, yet done only with a view to speaking more easily—at this moment an entirely unexpected accident occurred.

Under a furious blast of the gale which suddenly caught her, the additional strain upon Tom's sail tore away the cleat holding the sheet, and in an instant the boat fell off, and the sail went free, slatting madly in the furious gale.

The catastrophe threw the boat nearly in Jack Lightfoot's course, and made a greater accident almost unavoidable.

In the tenth part of a second, despite that Jack quickly threw his tiller, and broke the violence of the collision, the two boats came together nearly broadside, with the boom of Tom's boat momentarily threatening to rip Jack's sail to shreds.

Despite the imminent danger of this, as well as that of capsizing, Jack at once rose to the requirements of the startling situation.

With a lightning-like move, he cast off his own sheet,

and let the sail go free, at the same time yelling wildly, above the crash and beating of the waves:

"Let go your halyards! Drop your sail, Tom!"

Tom leaped to the cleats, and hurriedly cast off both the peak and throat halyards at once.

Down came the sail on the run, to the imminent peril of Jack's head, as he wrestled with the boom, which ran across his own boat, to keep the two tossing crafts from scraping.

"Don't lose your head, Tom!" he shouted. "Lend me a hand to keep the boats apart!"

"Can't you drop your sail?" cried Tom, quite dazed and alarmed for a moment.

"Not yet!" yelled Jack. "My sail is all right."

"Work the boom over this way!" cried Tom. "I'll fend you off!"

"Want any help?"

The last came from Lafe, who had seen the accident, and at once came about, to run up to the leeward of the two wildly pitching boats.

"Not yet!" shouted Jack, as he forced the boom and sail of Tom's boat out of his way.

"I've got it, Jack!"

"Make it fast in some way, and put a stay around the sail!" cried Jack. "This gale is driving us straight ashore!"

"Let me throw you a line!" yelled Lafe.

"Get one to Tom, if you can, and keep him from grounding too heavily. We'll all be ashore inside of a minute!"

"Here you go, Tom!"

Tom sprang forward over the wet thwarts, and caught the rope which Lafe, now hanging in the wind, had cast him. Hurriedly making it fast around the mast, he sprang aft, and grabbed the tiller.

"Fill away, Lafe!" he shouted. "Fill away lively!"

Lafe yanked his sheet down closer, and bore off a little, almost instantly making way under the heavy wind.

Yet the lee shore was less than twenty yards away, and to make a tack with the disabled boat in tow was next to impossible.

Jack Lightfoot saw the predicament they were in, and he took the only course that was left them.

"You can't tack, Lafe!" he roared. "It's too late—you can't tack! Stand up alongshore, and ground them as easily as you can! You can't make an offing!"

"I see I can't!"

"Head into the wind, and drop your sail!" shouted Jack, who now had his own boat clear and under control. "Then beach both boats as gently as you can. There's nothing else to be done."

This was done, moreover, even while he was speaking of it; for, under the furious sweep of the wind, the boats had rapidly drawn near the sandy shore.

While both Lafe and Tom leaped out into the shallow water to do what they could to fend them off, the two crafts grounded amid the waves, but with no great damage done.

"Haul them around to the wind, and get out an

anchor!" shouted Jack, now making ready to drop his own sail, and anchor his boat offshore. "They'll grind too much if you leave them on the beach. Get out an anchor, both of you, and we'll haul them off a rod or two."

It required some little time and their united efforts to get the boats offshore, but it was finally accomplished, and the drenched cruisers then found time to regain their breath.

"Gee! but this makes a nasty mess," declared Lafe, as they stood knee-deep in the breaking waves, and made sure that the boats were secure.

"It might have been worse, Lafe, a hundred times," Jack cheerily rejoined. "We're all alive and kicking; that's the main thing."

"Kicking is right!" laughed Lafe, a bit grimly.

"Is there much damage done?" inquired Tom, with teeth chattering under the chilling blasts of the wind.

"Very little," rejoined Jack. "Yet it's enough that we can't go farther to-night. We'll have to make camp again, and remain here till morning."

"There's nothing else we can do," nodded Lafe. "It would be absurd to try to beat farther against this gale."

"Decidedly absurd."

"Tom's about half frozen," added Lafe.

"Oh, no, I'm not!" protested Tom. "I'm only chilly."

"Let's get a move on, then, and bring our tent and traps ashore," cried Jack. "It's lucky the water is shallow, and that we'll have no bother. Look lively, all hands, so we can get into dry clothing and start a fire."

Floundering about in the water, the boys now set to work carrying their traps to the shore, and at the end of another half hour they had the tent pitched and a fire blazing on the beach near by.

This quickly put warmth into them, and, with dry garments on, they began to regard the situation less seriously, and were prepared to make the best of it.

"Luckily no rain has fallen," said Jack, while they set to work getting supper. "It's mostly a wind-storm, and everything is as dry as a bone."

"We can stand it till morning all right," replied Tom; "and then we'll take my boat in tow, and head for Mr. Linscott's. It strikes me that we can't be very far from his place, for we are much above the spot where we camped the first night out."

"So it seems to me, Tom," assented Jack. "Yet I don't quite recognize the surroundings. It soon will be dark, moreover, so we might as well take our medicine, and stay right here till morning."

"Humph!" growled Lafe. "This is good enough for me, once I get a square meal into me."

"It will be ready in a jiffy," laughed Jack.

It was nearly dark, however, when the boys sat down to the meal they had hurriedly prepared; yet the flames of the blazing fire gave them ample light, and shed over the shore and river a ruddy glow that added to the wildness of the scene.

The wind had begun to abate a trifle, they thought, and rifts between the clouds were revealing stars here and there in the dome of sky.

"It will come pleasant to-morrow," declared Jack confidently. "In case Mr. Linscott is not fretting over our absence, I would as soon camp one more night as not."

"So would I," cried Lafe. "I'm getting so that I'd rather sleep on the ground than in a bed. There's more room."

"Hark!" said Tom suddenly. "What was that?"

"I heard nothing."

"I think I heard a dog barking."

"Mebbe Macklin is after us with those coon dogs!" laughed Lafe.

"If there is a dog within hearing, we should be near some habitation," said Jack, rising to listen.

"Possibly we are on old Pigson's ground again, that Florida cracker!" growled Lafe. "If he shows up here to-night with any of his guff, I'm in a right good mood to punch his head off!"

"I don't think we shall see him, Lafe."

"Hark! There it is again!" cried Tom, also starting to his feet.

"It was the barking of a dog, all right."

"And it sounded nearer the last time. I'll bet that some one is coming this way with the animal."

"Let him come," sniffed Lafe. "It'll relieve the monotony to have a caller."

"Providing he is a desirable one," said Jack.

"Any kind suits me."

"You are right, Tom, there is some one coming," added Jack. "I can hear him breaking through the scrub."

For a moment or more the boys stood motionless, and listened.

The sound of approaching steps became louder, and presently the occasion of them put in an appearance through a break in the scrub.

Jack and Tom were the first to see him—a lank, raw-boned fellow carrying a gun, and who came trailing into camp with a pair of mangy hounds following at his heels.

The moment they caught sight of the raw-boned Florida cracker and his b'ar dogs, the storm-bound cruisers knew there was fresh trouble brewing.

CHAPTER IX.

CONCLUSION.

"What yer doin' hyar, you fellers?"

This was the greeting of the man, in a decidedly threatening tone, as he came slouching into the camp.

He was not the one the boys previously had encountered, yet one glance at his lank figure and hang-dog face convinced Jack Lightfoot that he was of the same family.

Instead of resenting the fellow's threatening voice, however, Jack replied courteously:

"We are here to camp until to-morrow morning."

"Ain't yer the same lot my brother ordered off a week back?" demanded Pigson, with a snarl.

"We met a man some days ago who ordered us not to camp about here," said Jack. "I don't know that he was your brother."

"Waal, he wuz, an' yer keern't stay here."

"We are obliged to remain here till morning. One of our boats is disabled."

"I keern't help thet!" cried Pigson, with a wave of his gun. "You uns hev got ter git!"

"Not to-night. We shall remain here till morning."

"Yer will, eh?"

"We are doing no harm, and I don't know that you have any right to order us away."

"Yer'll go, fur all thet, d'ye hyar? I won't hev yer campin' round hyar, an' if yer don't vamoose I'll——"

"We don't intend to camp here again," interrupted Jack, quite curtly. "We were driven ashore to-day, or we should have been up to Mr. Linscott's place by this time, for which we were heading."

"D'ye know him?" demanded Pigson, with a suspicious growl.

The eyes under his slouch hat had taken on a distrustful gleam, moreover, which Lafe Lampton was quick to notice, and it brought to his mind the talk the boys previously had had about the attempt to drive them away."

"Yes, we know Mr. Linscott, and those are his boats yonder," said Jack. "We shall not be about here after to-day, as we go north Monday."

"Yer do, eh?"

"That's what."

"Perhaps you will tell us how far we are from Mr. Linscott's place!" put in Tom inquiringly.

"I keern't tell yer nuthin'," cried Pigson, with an ugly headshake. "All I've got ter say ter you uns is this: If I ketch yer hyar ag'in, I'll set my dogs on yer! I'll not hev yer hyar, mind thet! D'ye see this gun what I've got hyar——"

"Yes, and I have a sight better one in the tent!" Lafe Lampton now interrupted, angrily jumping to his feet. "It'll shoot as far and straight as yours, mister, and I'm not afraid to use it if I have to do so. Now, don't you give us any more of this bluff game, for we're not the kind that take backwater. We're going to stay here, for all of you or your dogs, and, if you set 'em onto us, I'll blow their ugly heads off!"

There was no checking Lafe when he got fairly started in this strain, and, though Jack and Tom glanced disapprovingly at him, the lank "cracker" was by far the most startled of the three.

"D'ye mean thet, yer shrimp?" he cried, with a threatening shake of his fist.

"You'll find I mean it!" cried Lafe, suddenly darting into the tent.

He reappeared in less than a second, however, with his gun in his hand.

"Here 'tis, mister!" he cried, thrusting Jack aside when the latter attempted to check him. "Have a

look at it, mister! It's charged with duck shot. Now, you get out of this camp, both you and your dogs, and don't lose any time over it! If you're here in half-a-minute, there'll be more trouble than you're looking for!"

A cross between a scowl and a contemptuous grin rose over Pigson's lean, hangdog face, and he now pulled in his horns a trifle.

"Don't yer kick over the traces, young feller!" said he, with sinister quietude. "I'm tellin' yer what I mean——"

"And so am I!"

"Yer keern't camp hyar ag'in, an' thet settles it! Yer kin stay this time till mornin', but if ye're hyar arter thet, I'll fill yer full o' suthin' bigger'n duck shot. Put thet in yer pipe, an' smoke it!"

And, without another word, even before Lafe could answer him, the scowling ruffian turned sharply on his heel, and strode into the scrub, followed close by his pair of mangy hounds.

For a moment, so abrupt had been his departure, the boys stood staring after him in silence, half suspecting that he had some evil designs upon them.

"I guess he has gone for good," Jack presently muttered.

"Let him go or come!" growled Lafe, still flushing angrily. "What do we care? Those threats of his were only a big bluff!"

"There was nothing to be gained by fighting with the fellow," replied Jack.

"It served to make him clear out, at all events."

"Well, I'll admit that much!" laughed Jack. "Evidently he is a brother of the man we previously met."

"Certainly he is, Jack," said Tom. "He looks enough like him to be a twin."

"There's one thing mighty sure," declared Lafe, more quietly. "Both he and his brother had some reason for wanting us out of the way. Both of them would not have come into our camp and put up that same bluff for nothing."

"That appears reasonable, Lafe, for a fact," said Jack thoughtfully.

"I'll bet they had some crooked work on hand for both nights, or they'd not have been so anxious to drive us away. It looks to me as if they fear that we might know them, and take it into our heads to be watching them."

"I'm inclined to think that might be a very good plan."

"What do you mean, Jack?"

Before he answered, Jack Lightfoot walked up to the edge of the scrub for a moment, and listened intently.

Pigson's footsteps had died away in the distance, and only the sighing of the wind through the trees could now be heard.

"I'll tell you what I mean, boys," said Jack, when he rejoined them. "It's barely possible that these Pigsons are the fellows who have been stealing from Mr. Linscott."

"I'll wager you are right, Jack," said Lafe. "In that case, too, we can't be a very great distance from his plantation."

"That's just what I was thinking," nodded Jack. "Furthermore, if these fellows are the guilty parties, they may have had some trickery in view these two nights on which they have threatened us, and came into camp to make sure of what we were doing."

"Gee! I'll bet that's right!"

"If we could catch them in the act of stealing from Mr. Linscott——"

"Let's try it!" interrupted Lafe, with impulsive eagerness. "If we succeed, we'll provide Mr. Linscott with that very evidence he has been vainly trying to get, and we shall repay him in a measure for his kindness to us."

"That's the very project I had in mind," said Jack.

"But how are we to locate them?" Tom doubtfully asked.

"One or both of them may live somewhere about here," replied Jack. "You remember that Job Dean told us that two of the Pigsons had cabins over here."

"That's true."

"If we could find one of their cabins, as like as not we could discover something to the purpose."

"Is the game worth the hunt?"

"It certainly is, Tom, if we accomplish anything."

"Pigson went away in that direction," said Lafe, pointing off to the north. "It may be that he was bound home, but, upon seeing the light of our camp-fire, he may have come down to give us the bluff. If we could trail him——"

"It's too dark for that."

"We at least might be able to discover his cabin, and perhaps learn what he has in view to-night."

"What do you say, Tom?"

"I'm game to make the attempt, Jack, if you wish."

"Let's do it," repeated Lafe.

"That settles it," said Jack. "We'll take our guns along with us, in case of any trouble, and see what we can learn."

"That's the stuff! I'll bet we turn some kind of a trick."

It took the boys only a few minutes to prepare for this night expedition, and Jack was selected to lead the way. In Indian file they left the camp together, taking the direction in which Pigson had departed, and, with eyes and ears on the alert, they plunged into the scrub.

The sky had been steadily clearing, until many stars were visible, by the light of which the walking was made comparatively easy.

At the end of a quarter hour, after having covered upward of half-a-mile, Jack suddenly halted, and uttered a word of caution.

"What is it?" whispered Lafe, drawing nearer.

Jack pointed, without speaking.

Through the trees to the right a light was gleaming, as if through the curtainless window of a small house or cabin.

"Jiminy crickets! I'll bet that's where he lives!" whispered Lafe.

"I think so," nodded Jack.

"Can you see anybody?"

"Not from here."

"It won't do to get any nearer," cautioned Tom. "Those dogs might scent us, and give the alarm."

"Say! By hookey! there's a man with a lantern," said Lafe, all aglow with excitement.

Jack was watching more coolly, however, and he presently rejoined:

"There are two of them, Lafe."

"Two?"

"They are going out to a shed, and have got—yes, by gracious! they have both dogs with them."

These various features of the scene could be only indistinctly discerned, for the cabin was some fifty yards away, yet the movements of the man with the lantern were quite plainly visible.

Presently he opened the door of a small shed, into which he kicked both of the dogs, then closed the door again.

"He has shut them in there for the night," whispered Jack. "If the men are going on any thieving expedition, they would not want the dogs to follow them."

"Surely not."

"Are they returning to the house?"

"No, no, they have gone around it," whispered Jack, quite excitedly. "See, yonder goes the lantern. They are making off through the woods, both of them, and taking the lantern with them."

"That will make it dead easy for us to follow them," growled Lafe. "I'm blessed if I don't think we'd better learn where they are bound. What do you say?"

"That's my idea," said Jack decidedly. "Come on!"

Again they started in the same order, now following the distant lantern, which, like a will-o'-the-wisp, could be seen moving among the trees.

For thirty minutes the boys maintained this novel pursuit, all the while keeping so far away that they could not be heard.

Then the lantern suddenly stopped, as the man carrying it placed it on the ground, and bent down to extinguish it.

"That was Pigson, all right, the one we first encountered," whispered Jack, while they briefly halted. "I got a good look at his face when he blew out the flame."

"His brother must have come to his cabin to join him," Lafe rightly reasoned. "It's dead open and shut that they are up to something crooked."

"Yes, and now they've left their lantern," said Jack. "Yonder they go, across that clearing. Follow me, and tread lightly. We mustn't lose sight of them."

Even greater caution was now required, yet the boys stuck to their quarry.

Ten minutes later, upon rounding a bend of the woods which the Pigsons had cautiously skirted, a

small pineapple field met Jack's strained gaze, with fruit trees beyond it, through which the glow of curtained windows could be seen, and the roof of a dwelling, with several outbuildings.

Jack recognized the surroundings instantly, and briefly checked his companions.

"It's Mr. Linscott's place, on the peninsula!" he whispered joyously. "We have hit the nail on the head, boys! These Pigson fellows are here to steal something."

"Can you see them?" muttered Lafe, with an ugly grip on his gun.

"They were creeping along that wall a minute ago," said Jack. "It looks to me as if they were aiming to reach that building back of the carriage shed."

"That's where Mr. Linscott stores his grain, and—by Jove! there they go now!"

Quite plainly visible, just above the wall mentioned, two dark figures now could be seen stealing toward the building of which Jack had spoken, around one corner of which they presently disappeared. When they did not emerge from the opposite side, Jack said quickly:

"They have gone into it, boys, or are going in. It's up to us to do something."

"You name it," said Tom.

"We must hold them up when they come out with their plunder," Jack hurriedly rejoined, scarce above his breath.

"That's the stuff!" muttered Lafe. "That's the thing to do."

"They haven't their guns with them, so we'll have all the best of it," Jack quickly continued. "Now follow my instructions. We'll steal around to the front of the building, where the door is located, and the moment they come out, in case they are in there, Lafe and I will hold them up with our guns. Then you, Tom, bolt for the back door of the dwelling, and alarm the house. The hands are not abed yet, that's evident, and Lafe and I will hold these crooks till you can bring help."

"You bet we'll hold 'em all right!"

"What do you say, Tom?"

"The plan suits me, Jack."

"Forward, then! but tread as if upon eggs."

With guns ready, the boys now stole quickly across the open ground as far as the wall, which they quietly vaulted, then crept silently on till they could round the corner of the building.

As Jack had predicted, the Pigsons had forced the door, and were at that moment inside.

With a gesture, Jack signed for Lafe to crouch upon the ground some ten feet from the door, while he took a like position near by.

Then he nodded for Tom to go for help.

The latter no sooner had started, however, than the door of the shed was quietly opened from within, and out came both Pigsons, each with a bag of grain over his shoulder.

Instantly Jack and Lafe were upon their feet, the former shouting loudly:

"Stand still, you fellows! Not one move, or we'll fire!"

The Pigsons halted, as if turned to stone. Each dropped his bag of grain, and stared mutely for a moment at the two threatening figures dimly outlined in the starlight, with guns leveled and eyes flashing over the deadly barrels.

"Don't move!" cried Jack, in tones not wisely ignored. "Not the slightest move, you fellows, or I'll fill you full of lead!"

"Both barrels, too!" added Lafe, with a voice the helpless men had no trouble to recognize.

Shouts from the direction of the house now were heard, quickly followed by hurried footsteps, and Mr. Linscott, Zeb Sully, and three of the planter's men came rushing upon the scene.

In less time than it takes to write it, they had the Pigsons in custody, and, as Jack Lightfoot had declared, the game was well worth the hunt.

The surprise and satisfaction of Mr. Linscott, when the boys modestly told the whole story, may rightly be imagined; and the delight of Zeb, who had taken a great fancy to Jack, knew no bounds.

It appeared that the camp of the boys, which they had made after the boating incident, was only about a mile below Mr. Linscott's plantation, about half-a-mile from which was the Pigson cabin which the boys had discovered.

It afterward was proved that these were the scamps who had so long been doing the thieving, and their apprehension and arrest relieved Mr. Linscott of further trouble of that kind.

Though the following day was Sunday, the three boats were brought up from the camp, which was broken for the last time, and the remainder of the day was pleasantly passed with Mr. Linscott and his wife.

The next day witnessed another regretful parting, that of the boys from the genial friends who so kindly had provided for their memorable cruise.

The last sad word had to be said, however, and, when the sun of that day shed its declining rays athwart the still water of Indian River, the three Northern lads were miles away, with their gaze turned toward Cranford and its snow-clad hills, while the pleasant home on the peninsula was to them only a memory.

THE END.

In sharp contrast to their adventures in the warm and sunny Southland, our next story will deal with snow and ice, and the strange sports of Canada in the dead of winter, where the rushing toboggan shoots down the slopes of Mont Royal, and the gay snow-shoe hunters thread the white forest in search of the lordly moose. It will be entitled "Jack Lightfoot On Snow-shoes; or, The Chase of the Great Moose." Every reader will be delighted to accompany the boys of Cranford on another little sporting trip, in search of game, ere they settle down to school life, preparatory to entering old Harvard.

HOW TO DO THINGS

By AN OLD ATHLETE.

Timely essays and hints upon various athletic sports and pastimes in which our boys are usually deeply interested, and told in a way that may be easily understood. Instructive articles may be found in back numbers of the ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY, as follows: No. 31, "How to Make a Cheap Skiff." No. 32, "Archery." No. 33, "Cross-Country Running." No. 34, "The Game of Lacrosse." No. 35, "The Boy With a Hobby for Collecting." No. 36, "Football, and How to Play It." No. 37, "A Practice Game." No. 38, "How to Play Football—Training." No. 39, "The Men in the Line." No. 40, "The Men Behind." No. 41, "Signal Systems." No. 42, "Team Play." No. 43, "The End of the Season." No. 44, "A Gymnasium Without Apparatus." (I.) No. 45, "A Gymnasium Without Apparatus." (II.) No. 46, "Bag-Punching." No. 47, "Camping."

CRUISING IN SMALL BOATS.

Although at this season of the year King Jack Frost holds full and undisputed sway throughout the main part of our broad land, and neighboring Canada, the thoughts of those who are thus shut indoors frequently turn enviously toward the sunny Southland, where Jack and his chums are having such a glorious time; and consequently a little talk on the pleasures of cruising in canoes and other small craft of the single-hand build may not come amiss.

The fascination of this sport, when once it has seized upon a novice, can hardly be overestimated, and is seldom completely shaken off. It has even been said of many enthusiastic devotees of sail and paddle that they love their canoes above sweetheart or wife; but that must really be a gross exaggeration, and not worthy of credit.

Still, there is a strange and delightful charm about sailing across broad reaches of river or lagoon, or with flashing paddle sending the frail craft up some narrow and tortuous waterway, with only the timid wood-folk for company, and each bend of the stream opening up new and singular sights to the eager eyes of the explorer.

Let us then suppose that the craft chosen for the occasion is a regulation 15 x 30 canoe—that is, one measuring fifteen feet in length by thirty inches beam, with sail, and both double and single paddles, as a means for making progress.

The cruiser will need, besides his canoe-tent, a blanket, which can be used as a seat and back-rest during the day's work; a rubber poncho—that may be utilized for various purposes, such as a waterproof rain-cape, during showers, and to keep him from the damp ground when sleeping ashore—a rubber pillow, to be inflated every night, and a waterproof bag, like a sailor's, for holding a few extra garments, and which may be stowed away under the hatch forward.

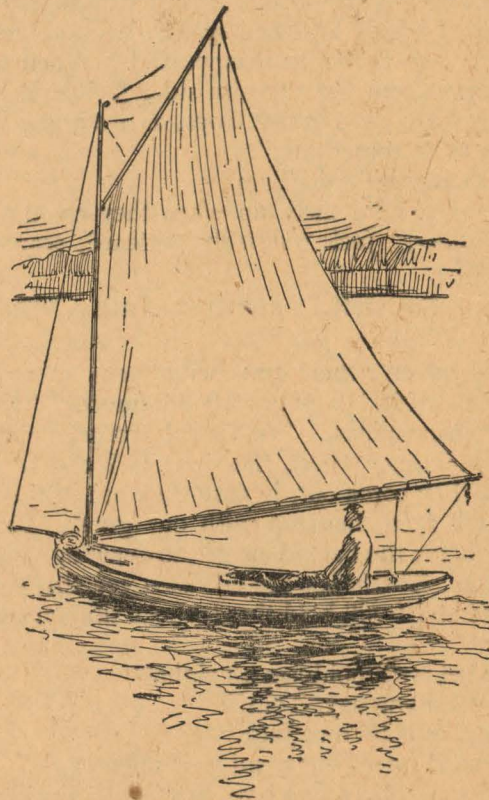
Then he must have a lantern, a camp hatchet, and the usual cooking utensils, made to "nest" in each other as much as possible, since space is at a premium on board so small a craft of the mosquito type; and often when our adventurer makes ready to snuggle down for the night in his confined quarters, he will find it necessary to transfer much of the cargo from the interior of the boat to the forward deck, where the tent, when placed in position, may shelter it from rain, dew, or flying spray.

His stores he will also keep in the main locker under the hatch forward, but his mess-chest and cooking utensils, as well as the little battery of *flammé forcé* lamps, using wood alcohol for fuel, must of necessity be in the cockpit with him; and this is what has to be moved, when he feels like "turning in."

This thing of sleeping aboard a canoe is not all it has been cracked up to be by some writers, and no truthful man will tell you it is a "dream and a joy altogether;" so that the cruiser, made wise by sad experience, will land whenever the opportunity opens, and camp ashore.

Still, there are occasions when dire necessity compels him to remain aboard—in Florida this happens frequently, since there may be swampy ground along the edge of the watercourse for miles—he will always mark those nights with a vengeance in his log, for in such cramped quarters it is so difficult to even turn, that when dawn finally creeps along he is apt to feel ten years older than when he went so blithely to bed.

Some canoeists cling to the single paddle under any and all conditions, forgetting that while that may be the proper caper for an open canoe holding two persons, or one in which the paddler sits in the stern, as the redman was wont to do, when stealing up on timid game, the double blade is far better suited to any craft modeled after the wonderful seaworthy *kaiak* of the Eskimo.



A SINGLE-HAND CRUISER BEFORE THE WIND.

Some object to the dripping of the water as it trickles down the pole of the jointed paddle and searches out the cruiser's elbows—a clever writer on canoeing has circumvented this trick by taking a couple of common rubber breast-shields, cutting off the nipples, and thus fashioning admirable drip cups. They may be purchased at any druggist's. And thus the average canoeist, who is a man of ideas, is quick to adapt anything that catches his eye to his own purpose, regardless.

It would be manifestly impossible in this one short article to explain the numerous things connected with canoe literature, the ordinary or technical name for the various parts, and just how to sail or paddle such a craft—such information would fill a book, and a pretty big one at that, and must, after all is said, be gained through

(Continued on page 30.)

A CHAT WITH YOU

Under this general head we purpose each week to sit around the camp fire, and have a heart-to-heart talk with those of our young readers who care to gather there, answering such letters as may reach us asking for information with regard to various healthy sports, both indoor and out. We should also be glad to hear what you think of the leading characters in your favorite publication. It is the editor's desire to make this department one that will be eagerly read from week to week by every admirer of the Jack Lightfoot stories, and prove to be of valuable assistance in building up manly, healthy Sons of America. All letters received will be answered immediately, but may not appear in print under five weeks, owing to the fact that the publication must go to press far in advance of the date of issue. Those who favor us with correspondence will please bear this in mind, and exercise a little patience.

THE EDITOR.

The ALL-SPORTS is the best library that I have ever read. I wish that I had seen it sooner than I did, for it was only last month that I saw the first number. A friend of mine gave me a copy and said that he thought I would like it. After reading the weekly I agreed with him, you bet. Will you tell me how to make a trap to catch mice? Of course I can get a simple trap in the store, but I want something that I can make myself. It is always so much more interesting when a person makes his own things. Our house is troubled with mice so bad that they are getting to be a nuisance. We have the most trouble in our garden, for it is there that little mice that look like field-mice burrow in the ground and root up everything in sight.

Chico, Cal.

JOHN SMATHERS.

A very simple trap that you can make yourself is a contrivance of easy construction, made out of a common jar. Ask your mother for an empty, good-sized jam jar. Take a piece of fairly stiff paper and stretch it over the mouth, and tie a string around the edge. A rubber-band will do just as well, for that matter. Mark the center of the paper with two lines, so that when they meet they will form four right angles in the middle. Then run a knife along the place you have marked, cutting gently, so that the paper will not get ripped. Do not cut to the edge of the jar, for you do not want too large a slit. Take a piece of cheese tied to a string, and suspend it from a shelf so that it will hang directly over the hole in the jar. The mice will be attracted by the smell of the cheese and try to get it. As the paper over the cover of the jar will seem to be perfectly flat, the mice will crawl along and fall through the slit before they can take alarm and retreat to a safe place. The paper will fly back in place again, and the trap will be ready for the next adventuresome mouse who tries to reach the cheese.

To catch mice, or other small animals in the fields or in your garden, a trap of simple design and construction can be made out of an old earthen jug. You will probably find one in the garret or in the cellar; the kind that the grocer fills with molasses for your pancakes these winter mornings. Knock a hole in the side just large enough for an animal the size of a mouse to get through. Then dig a hole in the ground where you want to set the trap deep enough to have the mouth of the jug even with the surface, the hole in the side of the jug being not more than an inch below the ground. Make a little burrow or passageway from it to the top of the earth. If the hole in the jug is in the right place your tunnel will be on a slight incline. This will give the mouse a chance to crawl in without being obliged to go up-hill on his journey to his dinner at the other end of the passageway. You do not want to make him suspicious, or he will not take the bait. Strew cheese and other delicacies which tickle the palates of our rodent friends along the little

tunnel, and it will not be long before they come out to investigate the nature of the banquet you have spread out for them. All kinds of small animals, like field-mice, can be caught in a trap made like the one just described. Sometimes they can be tamed and made interesting pets. But probably your mother would not take kindly to the idea of your turning the house into a sort of menagerie.

I have just finished reading No. 37 of your ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY, and think it is the best so far. Although I like Wilson Crane, I think he got his just deserts when he was thrown out of the club. I am eagerly waiting for No. 38, as I want to see what Jack's team will do at that fine game called football. If the team does as good at football as it did at baseball it will be all right. My favorites are Jack, Tom, Phil, Brodie, Lafe, Jubal, Skeen, Nat, and last, but not least, Mack, the reporter. There is one thing that I like about Jack, and that is that he is not one of these goody-goody fellows that never had any bad faults. Wilson Crane must have a case of swell-head to think that he is better than Jack or even as good. I will close, with good wishes for M. S. and the publishers, P. D. Q. Baltimore, Md.

We write to let you know what we think of the greatest of weeklies, ALL-SPORTS. It is the best that we have ever read. We like the articles on outdoor sports and think they are great. We know some boys who think as much of them as the stories.

JOHN WISE,
CON. WILKES,
JAMES MCKINNERY.

Steelton, Pa.

We thank you for telling us that you admire ALL-SPORTS. Of course you like the weekly; every boy who reads it says the same. It has such "bully" good stories that when once you become a reader you will remain a loyal friend, and have a good word for it on all occasions. The articles appearing every week have given information on a variety of subjects to numerous readers who were unable to obtain it anywhere else. In every issue there will appear something different, so that if you keep each number you will have a valuable file at the end of the year.

I cannot praise your ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY enough. I only wish that the publishers had thought to put it out many years ago, so I could have had the pleasure of reading it sooner. But "better late than never" is how I feel about it, and I guess that all other people who take ALL-SPORTS say the same thing. What a grand good thing it is that boys have such libraries coming to them every week! I look forward each week to getting the ALL-SPORTS, as father does to getting the Sunday paper. I think your paper better than the other.

Chicago, Ill.

SYLVESTER BRIGGS.

All other readers of ALL-SPORTS agree with you in what you say about regretting that the weekly was not put before them some time ago. When anything strikes the fancy of readers in this manner it is a very good sign that it is up-to-date.

I write to tell you that I think Jack Lightfoot is the finest fellow I ever heard about. I like him as well as the great detective, Nick Carter, whose wonderful stories I have read a long while. Give me Jack Lightfoot and his victories on diamond and gridiron for mine. Three cheers for the great American hero.

Beloit, Wis.

LANCE HILL.

You have made no mistake in selecting the ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY for your favorite reading, as it is always interesting.

Although I have written before to ALL-SPORTS, I can't help writing again. The last time I wrote, requesting postals, my State was printed "Mich." I got some of the postals and I suppose the senders were a little impatient when I sent about two weeks after they had mailed theirs. I live in the "North Star State." Mr. Stevens writes his stories better every week. When I read of Lafe in No. 1, as he "came by the paling fence munching an apple," I was interested at once, and I've read every number since then. I hope ALL-SPORTS will always be published. I am going to have mine bound, thirteen to a volume. I always speak a good word for ALL-SPORTS when I can, for I think every boy should read it. But probably I am taking up too much valuable space, and as I want to see this in print, I will close, with best wishes to Mr. Stevens and success to the Winner Library.

ROY KERR.

Stillwater, Minn.

I have been reading the ALL-SPORTS ever since it was first published, and I think it is the liveliest and most interesting library I ever read, and I have read books written by some of our most famous authors. I agree with our friend Bradley. The stories seem most too short; that is the only fault I find. I will now give some of my measurements. I am 18 years old; height, 5 feet 7 inches; chest, normal, 35 inches; expanded, 38½ inches; waist, 31 inches; hips, 35 inches. How are my measurements, and what exercise should I take? With a "hurrah" for Jack and Tom, I am,

AN ALL-SPORTS ADMIRER.

Ilchester, Md.

Your measurements are fair, but you should use Indian clubs and dumb-bells to increase your chest expansion. A few months of this will put you in good condition.

("How to do Things")—Continued from page 28.

actual experience rather than through reading "How To Do Things."

But it might not be amiss to say a few words that may be of value to the novice who is considering the purchase of a canoe, either of the open, birch-bark model, now made of canvas, painted, slippery as ice, and far superior to the old Indian type; or the decked-combined sailing and paddling craft.

When disembarking, *always* be sure to keep your weight upon the one foot that remains in the bottom, until you can quietly transfer the center of gravity to the one ashore. A hasty or incautious movement when either embarking or leaving a light canoe will usually result in a wetting; for the cantankerous thing can "buck" like the veriest bronco. And yet, like a bicycle, once mastered, the canoe proves a most docile servant, and affords a most incredible amount of pleasure.

Single-hand cruisers, measuring about 16 x 5, are also a source of infinite satisfaction to those who believe in being more comfortably housed than the limited space of a canoe will permit.

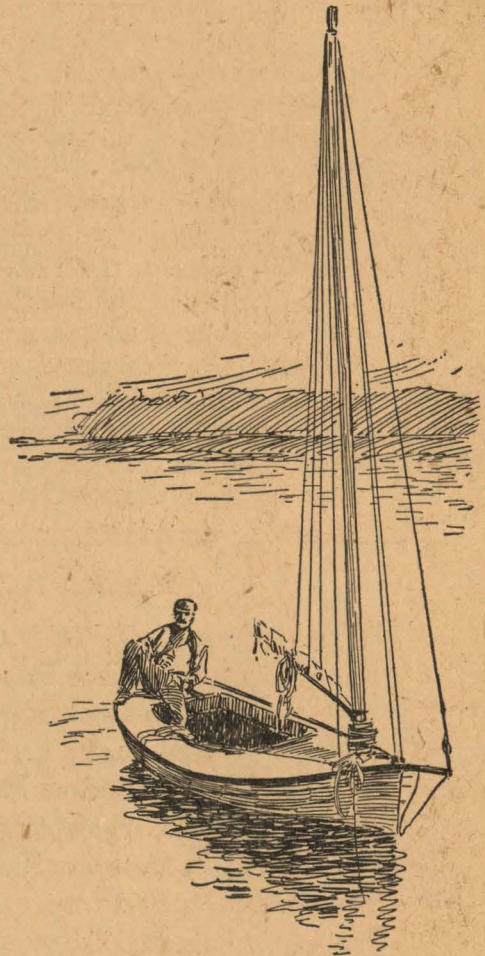
These craft have numerous devoted admirers, and the writer of this article can vouch for their many good qualities, having voyaged several hundred miles in one fashioned somewhat on the model of the accompanying illustrations, along the entire east coast of Florida.

Of course such boats depend entirely upon the favor of the fickle wind, and in case of a calm, the clumsy "setting pole" or "push pole" makes but a sorry substitute for the swiftly flashing double-blade paddle. They certainly allow considerable stowage room, and make a jolly good home for the cruiser, his gun and rod hanging on racks under the deck, alongside the cockpit, and handy to his reach.

If you cruise where insects are apt to prove troublesome, it is wise to carry at least a head-net made of cheese-cloth, or fine bobbinet, as it takes but scant room, and will evoke your blessings many times when comrades

are lying about the camp, their heads swathed in towels or sail-cloth. Still better, take along a supply of the "dope" or blackfly and "skeeter" ointment, directions for making and applying which were given in our last number.

Another word of advice from an old and experienced cruiser may be of value—start right in the morning; don't be in too great a hurry to get away from your camp or anchorage; at least fortify yourself by means of a good substantial breakfast, since there can be no telling how long it will be ere you can count on getting another



THE "MAYBLOSSOM"
AT ANCHOR AFTER A DAY'S CRUISING

meal. The wind may seem inviting, but it will probably hold out until noon anyway; and besides, the day is long.

If sleeping in your boat tie up to leeward of a wharf, allowing a few yards of painter at your bow—then cast an anchor from the stern, and there you are, as snug as a bug in a rug. If you want to go ashore, haul in the little folding anchor, pull on the painter until you can clutch the timbers of the dock, and the thing is done.

Having anchored thus, put up your tent, cook a hearty supper, chat with your fellow cruiser, who is similarly situated alongside, only a couple of yards away; smoke your pipe if a victim of nicotin, and finally make ready for your bed; for a day's arduous work on the water is apt to make one anxious to turn in, even though but the thickness of a double blanket lies between his ribs and the hard wooden planking of the faithful craft he calls his home.

Then douse the glim—all's well—good night!

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Billy is the personification of "right makes might." No true boy can read the tales of his trials and successes without imbibing some of that resource and courage that makes the character of this homeless lad stand out so prominently. Boys, if you want the most interesting stories ever written about a boy, do not fail to read the "Bowery Boy Library" every week. You will be more than satisfied with the investment of your nickel.

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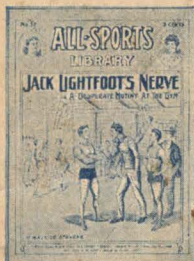
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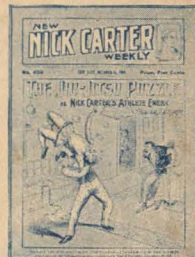
TIP TOP WEEKLY



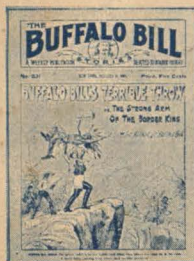
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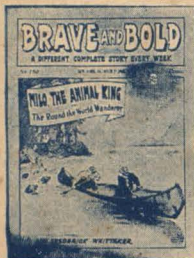
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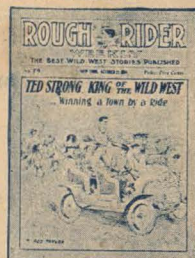
BRAVE AND BOLD



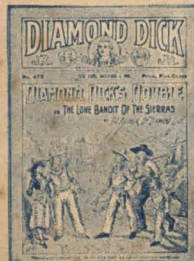
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